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VOL. II.



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D'ESPIGNAC.

CHAPTER VIII.

Il en gémit, et dit que sur personne
Il ne faudra s'assurer désormais.

VOLTAIRE.

THE King awaited de Montbel's arrival with impatience, and fortunately it was not long before he was announced. How different was his appearance from that of the Count. In spite of all, the latter could not help feeling, at a glance, how very far he was yet behind him in those arts and graces which constitute the refined courtier. With consummate skill he had employed the short space of time since

his return from the wood in adorning his person, for, with his courtly experience, he could not fail to anticipate this summons. From the gilt buttons on his vest, marked with the death's-head and cross-bones, to the sword-knot which Henry had woven with his own hands, nothing was omitted that could flatter his royal master.

At the moment he entered, the King was occupied at a mirror at the end of the apartment. He turned, as he caught the reflection of the favourite in the glass, with a look beaming delight and approbation at this tacit show of respect and attention, and he stepped hastily forward, extending both hands in unfeigned pleasure at his approach, perhaps forgetting at the moment all his alarm, in the conviction that de Montbél possessed faith and courage to defeat any danger which menaced him.

“Welcome, thrice welcome!” said he in a flippant lively tone, which completely dis-

gusted La Vallée, whose heart was yet palpitating with the terror he had undergone in the forest—"Welcome, *mon compère!*" (a name of endearment which he always used in addressing his favourites)—"But—but, *de par-dieu!* how well thou art attired! 'Tis easy to see Leblanc has been at thy toilet! Is it not fair hair, La Vallée, fair as Estelle's? On our honour as a man; on our faith as a monarch, there is none like Leblanc for the soft rolling curl! Would to Heaven it did but suit our complexion! But, alas! our hair has not the luxuriance which thine can boast, *de Montbel!*" sighing deeply, as though it were a matter of the greatest regret, and twisting the thin perfumed ringlets round his fingers in manifest sorrow. "In truth, we need thy presence full as much as thy counsel to persuade us that we are not (as some would have us believe) sunk to a mere head-falconer or master of the hounds!"

The last words were uttered close to de Montbel's ear, and in a whisper so low that

the Count could not distinguish their import ; but the quick glance towards himself told that they were concerning him. Pique and jealousy made him resolve to revenge himself by making them both participate ere long in his own feelings, for he could not doubt that de Montbel would experience much apprehension at the possibility of losing Avilly.

But de Montbel laughed in unconstrained mirth, and exclaimed—

“ In truth, your Majesty, I must confess I was greatly alarmed for your royal health, when I found you joined not our merry fowling-party, seeing that none have such success in the casting of a net, and by whom (without flattery be it spoken) the very birds of the air think it honour to be made captive! I just tarried to put myself in decent plight ere I ventured to seek your royal presence, and was in all haste hither to inquire concerning your Majesty, when the gracious summons reached me. But I have only to look at your Majesty,”

he continued, bowing low and archly smiling, "to be convinced of my error, and am fain to suppose that something serious has happened to disturb your Majesty's royal peace. I fear me the merlin will not recover, or that Floride has refused to nurse the liver-coloured puppy!" stooping, in feigned interest as he spoke, to one of the baskets, where reposed a beautiful silken spaniel, who, roused by his approach, sent forth a savage growl, seemingly anxious to defend against curious gazers the litter under her charge.

Henry knelt down by the side of the Duke, apparently forgetful of all beside.

"Nay, nay," he exclaimed, earnestly; "Heaven forbend such misfortune should ever chance! see, she has taken it like one of her own; look how well it thrives, it will not pine long for lack of its own dam! Peace, saucy fool!" he continued, as he searched for the little shiverer beneath the soft coat of Floride, who seemed unwilling to resign it to his care; and

loosening a button of his vest he placed it in his bosom. La Vallée gazed on the two friends, as they knelt thus side by side, with a look in which indignation and contempt were strangely blended. When, however, the King arose, he prepared with solemn countenance for the discussion of that important subject which then occupied his mind, to the total exclusion of every other; and in a tone which he endeavoured in vain to divest of sarcasm, begged to remind his Majesty that the serious matter upon which they had been engaged, ere de Montbel's entrance, required attention, as it would be necessary to take immediate steps for the capture of Count Adhémar. He was secretly delighted to witness the instantaneous effect which the very name had upon the Duke; he started when it was pronounced, and a scarlet flush spread over his countenance, quickly succeeded by a death-like paleness, as he hurriedly exclaimed,

“ What is it? what is it? Have you found the

retreat of young Adhémar the forester? have you hopes to seize him? So, so! please your Majesty, is it true what I hear, that Count Adhémar is discovered?"

But the King was not yet disposed to turn to serious matters; he heard not the question, for he was pre-occupied, and, totally regardless of de Montbel's agitation, suddenly exclaimed :

"Whence comes this heavenly gale of perfume? of a truth it is sweeter than any thing we ever could have fancied." He looked to the right and left, and his glance at length rested on the Duke. "Now as we live, de Montbel," he continued, somewhat piqued, "were it any other than thyself, we could find in our heart to banish him from Court! Thou art not worthy to be our Chamberlain."

"Sire?" said de Montbel, evidently puzzled.

"I tell thee thou art not worthy to be our Chamberlain."

The Count listened with a slight feeling of

hope, for he perceived that de Montbel's agitation was increasing, while Henry pursued :

"Any other than thou were fitting for such post. It is thou who art the bearer of the delicious fragrance which has stole away our sense ; it is some new perfume of which thou hast not suffered us to know the existence. Where hast thou lodged it, traitor ? in thy hair or beard ? in thy fraise or ruffles ?"

But he spoke in vain ; a single word had tamed down de Montbel's buoyant spirit. He could not join, even to please his Majesty, as he had just before done, in such frivolity.

"Pardon me, your Majesty," said he faintly, his embarrassment appearing almost ludicrous, when contrasted with the frivolity of the subject. "I know not—I know not—I—I—it is doubtless Leblanc's invention ; he has cunning wit in the combination of perfumes, and perchance—but he shall present it to your Majesty, and—and—"

"Why, gramercy, de Montbel !" exclaimed Henry in astonishment, at the trembling tone of the speaker's voice, "what ails thee ? how pale thou art become ! what sudden ailment hath visited thee ? Here is some of the essence our mother brought from Florence, it will revive thee on the instant : unbar yonder casement, La Vallée ; there is sad lack of air in the chamber."

"I fear me it will not be of such great service as your Majesty could wish," said the Count, in secret triumph that de Montbel should join in his own alarm ; "it will in no wise diminish his dread of Adhémar d'Espignac."

"Ha ! what !" exclaimed the King, letting fall the glass in which he was good-naturedly mixing the restorative for the Duke ; "has de Montbel also a fear of the young Count ? has he— ?"

"Think it not, I pray you, Sire !" said de Montbel ; "it was but a sudden faintness—but

—but is it true? Know you any thing of the refuge of young d’Espignac?”

“Alas! it is but too true. We have discovered all concerning him. Sit thee down; La Vallée has much to tell us, and moreover, has news for thine ear by no means pleasing,” said the King, with that strange delight which all gossips feel in alarming the minds of their listeners. He drew his chair close to the table, and the two courtiers opposite each other availed themselves of the permission to be seated, and waited for the King to speak first; the one in a kind of nervous terror but too apparent in his eager looks, the other in a gloomy satisfaction at having so well disturbed the merry mood of his companions.

De Montbel listened with silent attention while Henry told the story of de Lognac’s ill success—how that his envoy had scoured all Lorraine in search of the rebel Count—how that he had tracked him to the forest of Chantilly, where he still remained—how that this

intelligence having just arrived as he was on the point of setting out for the wood, had prevented him from pursuing his intention, as he deemed it the height of imprudence to rush, as it were, into the lion's jaws, and did not mean to venture abroad: the affair of Avignon had rendered him careful of risking his life where malcontents were lurking—how that he should use all speed in departing from the place; and concluded by asking de Montbel, if he did not think the people of Bretagne the most peaceable of all his subjects, and the best affected towards him?

The subject seemed one of absorbing interest to the Duke; he listened in trembling eagerness—he grew alternately red and pale—he withdrew not his eyes from the speaker; and when the latter had concluded, he exclaimed hastily:—

“But is it sure de Lognac's messenger may not have mistaken? Perchance he has followed—ha, ha!—psha! none can believe it—

he would not seek safety here : perhaps he has taken another name, and—”

“ Ay, ay ! thou hast divined aright ! We know it all ! ” exclaimed the King, throwing both his arms upon the table with true gossip energy ; “ he has borne the name of—of—nay, we have had so much to confuse our mind of late, that it has already escaped our memory ; but the soldier will tell us in the morn. We sadly feared, when we learned he had reached the wood, that we had but small chance of discovering him ; but now what thinkest thou ? La Vallée has seen him ! ay, stood side by side ! and spoken to him this very day ! ”

“ Ah ! what, your Majesty ? do I hear aright ? ” exclaimed de Montbel, sinking back in his chair. “ It cannot be ! Oh, God ! he is lost ! he is lost ! and by his own rash imprudence, after all our injunctions.”

“ Nay, nay, de Montbel, thy senses wander ! La Vallée is safe before thee. But we

marvel not at thy affright: he has escaped by mere miracle: for once the young man missed his aim, although he drew the trigger close to his ear. Didst not say so, La Vallée? Only think, de Montbel! Tell us all concerning it, Monsieur le Comte; we cannot live another instant if we know not how it was: you got free of such danger."

Thus saying, he drew his chair closer, and rubbed his hands, as though he expected a mere tale of interest, so much had de Montbel's presence dispelled all the gloomy terror he had before experienced. But the young Duke appeared somewhat doubtful of the truth of the story. He eyed La Vallée sternly, and his tone was slightly marked by irony, as he answered, "La Vallée has over much good fortune, Sire. I have heard of marvellous escapes in perils by land, and in perils by sea, in fire and in battle; but—but he is the first who ever withdrew unharmed from beneath the aim of d'Espignac's rifle! No, no, it is some bung-

ling woodsman, who would have scared him into a belief that Adhémar lingered at Avilly."

"Think it not, think it not, de Montbel; it was indeed the forester himself. Ah, if thou hadst beheld the Count when first he entered here, thou wouldst not thus disbelieve. He appeared to stand in no small need of some of the rose-flake, which thou dost condemn me so oft for using, seeing that it is hurtful to the skin. Tell the tale, La Vallée; thou wilt love to hear it, *mon compère*; he says it is one of much interest, and we doubt not he speaketh truth."

The Count did not need much persuasion to induce him to speak on a subject, of which he had done nothing but think for the last hour. He had now a double turn to serve, that of disburthening himself of his own fears, and creating fresh ones in the minds of his companions; and he had the satisfaction of perceiving, as he slowly and emphatically unfolded all which had passed in the forest, that de

Montbel's agitation increased, and that the childish mirth, in which the King had indulged, was effectually checked. The impassioned language, the wild energy and deep despair of the youth, were all pourtrayed with appalling fidelity ; for the memory of the Count, upon subjects connected with advancement or interest, was faithful and tenacious ; and every word, every look, every gesture, was rendered with accuracy, as it evidently needed no exaggeration to create sufficient dread in the bosoms of his listeners.

While he spoke, de Montbel withdrew not his eyes, no, not once, from his countenance, so deep was the attention with which he listened. The King, too, who ever took his tone from the reigning favourite, appeared amply to participate in his alarm. When La Vallée had concluded, he turned to the Duke for his advice.

"What thinkest thou, de Montbel?" said he ; "were it wise to cause the wood to be

searched ? We can rely upon our Guard ; but then it would not be prudent to leave the palace unwatched. We know not, in truth, what were best : but something must be done to rid ourselves of d'Espignac, silently and quietly, for he standeth on his own land. And think you, he might raise the whole forest ; he might surround us on all sides ; he might fire the palace ! he might — he might —”

He paused, half in affright at the horrors which he had himself conjured up, and partly also for want of breath, and La Vallée eagerly seized upon the opportunity to speak.

“But, so please your Majesty, I have a plan by which all such risk may be avoided. De Montbel will doubtless agree, for he has more interest in Avilly than I have myself.”

He glanced at the Duke with a smile which he intended to be wicked, but it was unperceived. De Montbel was leaning back in his chair ; his legs were stretched their full length beneath the table ; his eyes were downcast, and his

head reclined upon his bosom, while his hand had unconsciously sought the jewelled dagger which was stuck in the folds of his embroidered sash, and the click of the well-wrought *ferrara* against the sheath, as he worked it in and out with impatient jerk, was the only sound that for awhile broke the silence. The Count, who knew that de Montbel was giddy and heedless, was uncertain if he had gained his attention, and he proceeded with more emphasis, in that sort of *voix pateline*, which he had ever at command.

“ I had thoughts, your Majesty, of prevailing upon de Montbel, my dear Achille, who of course would not hesitate to serve your Majesty in all things, to—to—undertake the—the affair. I should not love to win the hatred of the vassals of Avilly—they would rise against me ; and for the royal guard to be scouring the wood in search of the rebel at a time like this would be—besides, it is useless for any who are known, to pursue the search ; it would but

gain the hate of the foresters, and lose all chance of discovering Adhémar. Now, de Montbel's followers are utter strangers; they may come hither unheeded, and—and—ha! what think you, de Montbel?—know you of any among your band of retainers whom you could trust with our secret?—know you of one whose quick eye and ready dagger we could press into our service,—one who could wander with noiseless step, and keep his own counsel? It must be done in silence and in darkness;—there must be no boasting tongues or busy meddling: silent, passive obedience alone is needed! Could we but rely on that, we may consider our undertaking already successful.”

Henry appeared eagerly to grasp at the suggestion; he cared not, so that the trouble were taken off his hands.

“Yes, yes,” he exclaimed, “de Montbel will aid us; he would not love to lose Avilly any more than we should love to resign our throne! Say, *mon compère*, couldst thou not

lend us thy assistance in ridding us of d'Espignac? Ha! wilt thou, de Montbel?" he said again, when he found the Duke still spoke not.

De Montbel turned with a suddenness that caused the King to start; even La Vallée felt uneasy as he met the stern gaze of his rival: he had never seen the full blue eye of de Montbel flash save in merriment, but now it shot fierce in ire as the proud and dark one of Count Adhémar, and he trembled beneath its glance. The brow of the youth was contracted to a deadly frown, as he slowly arose, to the no small astonishment of the King, and in a stern voice replied,—“So please your Majesty, my thoughts on this matter were not hard to read; but, as I am thus compelled to speak them out, I would say, in all truth, that did such proposition come from any other than the King my master, or one whom, like the Count, I am in duty bound to reverence, I should have deemed it equal to a challenge to meet him in the wood,

and should straightway have answered it as becomes a soldier and a gentleman, from the point of my trusty blade, and—and, by Heaven ! he would not long have lacked a thorough comprehension of my meaning !”

He pushed the chair indignantly away, and paced the floor to and fro, evidently heedless of what effect his answer might have upon the King. The latter was indeed astonished,—nay, almost alarmed,—so unusual was it for him to witness any display of passion from his courtiers. His great desire had been to pass his life in the happy calm of indifference ; by long indulgence in voluptuous tranquillity, he had grown unequal to the task of bearing any violent excitement, and those who valued his favour were careful not to give way to resentment in his presence.

But at that moment de Montbel appeared scarcely conscious that his Majesty was nigh. All the suavity of the polished courtier seemed to have deserted him, as well as the

graceful ease and boyish gaiety for which he was so distinguished. He had apparently forgotten Henry's boundless admiration of his golden hair, and that all Leblanc's skill had been put in requisition in its decoration, for his fingers were thrust, with a kind of nervous motion amid the silken curls, to the total destruction of their neat and scientific arrangement.

La Vallée was, much too politic to break silence ere he knew how it would please the King to receive de Montbel's answer. For himself, he was overjoyed at the rashness of the speech : in it he fancied he could read elevation to himself—dismissal, disgrace, perhaps even exile, to his rival.

But such hope was not of long duration. Henry loved de Montbel as his own brother. What, perhaps, had more weight, the consciousness that de Montbel returned his love, made him overlook what in another would have been unpardonable. Above all things he dreaded a scene. Ill health and weariness had

rendered him too weak and nervous to play his part with becoming spirit. He arose with a vain attempt at dignity; but when he spoke, his tone was meek and placid, and more partaking of reproach than of anger.

“Methinks, my Lord Duke,” said he, endeavouring in vain to look severe, “you are somewhat over bold, and presume too much upon our favour; moreover, for one who has partaken so largely of our royal bounty, there is some little savouring of ingratitude in this strange forgetfulness; and—and—but Monsieur de Montbel will doubtless recollect himself ere he again seeks our presence: he will not forget that such show of anger may be well displayed to hinds and vassals, but we marvel much that one who has so long breathed the air of a Court, should not have learned to curb such feeling when called in counsel by his sovereign.”

“It is well—it is well, Sire!” returned de Montbel quickly, and evidently too much pre-

occupied to notice the vast effort the King was making to appear even thus stern with one he loved so well : “ your Majesty has said right—it is possible that I have forgotten ; but when I stand and hear the planning of a cool deliberate murder, it is natural I should deem myself anywhere, save in the presence of his Majesty the King of France ! It is true I have suddenly become too rude and unpolished to be well at Court : I will therefore straightway retire to my own domain, where I myself am king ; and I shall have occupation to amuse my leisure in rejecting from my counsels all who, to serve their own ambition, would not hesitate to yield my name to dishonour, and lead myself onward to destruction ! ”

La Vallée coloured and bit his lip, while the Duke proceeded, ere yet the King had recovered from his astonishment :—“ I see it is time that I withdrew hence ; your Majesty has more able counsellors. In short, methinks I should be troublesome, while the foolish preju-

dices which I inherit from my father concerning honour and truth yet lurk within my bosom."

He moved towards the door, while yet the King was too much agitated to speak. The hand of the favourite was on the latch, he was on the point of raising it, when suddenly all the better part of his generous nature seemed to revive within him. He turned and gazed upon his master; his countenance became flushed, and a tear stood in his eye as he returned a few paces into the apartment, and said in a tremulous voice,

"Farewell, Sire! I pray you, deem me not ungrateful in thus departing—I am not needed amid the better and more zealous friends by whom you are surrounded. The prayer that your Majesty may long continue in prosperity will oft ascend to Heaven from my retreat! but, should the day of adversity arrive, then shall my right arm be once more at your command; my heart, my hopes, my fortune, once more be laid at your feet. Fare you well, Sire! I

bear with me remembrance of kindness never to be effaced. I may, perchance, behold your Majesty no more, but—but—" He paused ; his fortitude was evidently forsaking him. He stretched forth his hand to reach the jewelled cap which he had laid upon the table on his entrance, and La Vallée pushed it hastily towards him, that he might not be detained. But Henry could bear no more. He remembered not that he was King, and that de Montbel was his subject. All was forgotten, save that he was about to lose the faithful friend who had so often stood between him and the resentment of his people; whose noble heart had made him scorn to take, like many others of his favourites, advantage of his attachment to satisfy a base cupidity; whose friendship had been warm and sincere—the disinterested friendship of early youth; for no sacrifice, however great, was ever regretted by de Montbel; and where could he find another to replace him? He trembled so violently that he was fain to lean

against the table for support, and almost ready to burst into tears, he exclaimed in a tone of voice scarcely audible,—

“Leave us not, de Montbel, leave us not ! Nay, we know thou wilt not leave us ! We know thou lovest us too well to desert us now, when we stand more than ever in need of thy assistance ! Nay, nay, we know thou wilt not go ! thou wilt remain ! Say it, say it, de Montbel, or we shall sink with grief to see the last of those we loved forsake us thus !”

He dropped into his chair unable to proceed ; de Montbel was evidently deeply moved ; but La Vallée’s heart sickened, to see how much real love subsisted between the two friends. He could scarcely have believed it, from the giddy, volatile nature of the one, and the indolent frivolity of the other. He drummed upon the elbow of his chair in disappointment and disgust, unheeded by either party ; they were too much occupied by their own feelings to notice him. Henry appeared impa-

tient to hear the sound of de Montbel's voice, for he again exclaimed quickly,

"Thou wilt not go! nay, turn again, de Montbel! we know not, in truth, what would befall us wert thou to depart! thou, who hast so well replaced to us poor Quélus, and to whom we look for aid in every emergency. Here, sit thee down!" himself drawing a chair for the Duke to be seated. He smiled, and appeared more cheerful, when the proffered kindness was accepted by the courtier, with a low and graceful bow. "We will talk the matter over," he resumed; "no harm shall befall d'Espignac, if thou dost not think it wise. Dost hear, La Vallée? We'll have nothing to do with this affair. De Montbel here deems it would not be prudent. Let all be got in readiness; we'll remove the Court to Nantes. Let him be lord of his own land! We care not—he may possess the whole forest if he but leave us in peace!"

"Nay, but, Sire," said La Vallée in alarm,

lest the King should really put such design in execution, " I may as well then yield at once ; my tenure is frail indeed if I am left alone without assistance. It is hard to be so served, and yet Heaven knows it is not for myself I care. I did but covet Avilly for the sake of him to whom my daughter is to be united, and —"

" Stay !" cried de Montbel, with a return of his own gay spirit, " if it be me to whom you would allude, let me frankly own I value not one jot your Avilly, of which you make such boast. Verily, methought it was some Paradise to hear you speak on't ; ha, ha !" he continued, with that merry laugh, in which the King could never choose but join ; " were I ever to become lord of this place, your Majesty would have but small chance of ever again beholding me. *Sandis !* if I were once merely to seek the harmless amusement of walking over my possessions, I might walk till the day of death ere I again beheld the light. Why,

so please your Majesty, the very first time I rode thither with the King of Navarre, chancing to miss him from my side, I foolishly essayed to follow him ; but, alas ! my goodly steed, although, as your Majesty well knows, without compeer at curvet and caracole, being unable to jump through stone walls, found it impossible to penetrate the sturdy coppice-wood, and after having burst my best doublet and split my rose-coloured satin scarf, which had got entangled round the branches of an oak, where it was a miracle I did not hang to this day suspended by the middle, I was forced to retrace my steps, my nose and beard all the time becoming most disagreeably familiar with my horse's mane, else had I lost the dainty shoulder-knots, which I prize more than I can tell, seeing they were your Majesty's gracious present. No, no ! give me my own smiling domain on the banks of the silvery Garonne. *Cadedis !* one foot of its happy soil is worth whole acres of this gloomy forest !”

The King laughed in childish merriment to see the favourite once more in good-humour, while the Count de la Vallée was completely lost in astonishment. It was the first time he had heard de Montbel express a distaste to Avilly, and with true worldly philosophy he directly imagined that he must be influenced by some secret motive.

He was further confirmed in this idea by the slight degree of nervous embarrassment which, to his practised eye, was visible amid all his apparently giddy thoughtlessness.

"You are surely not in earnest, de Montbel?" said he, fixing upon him one of his own peculiarly searching looks; "you would not reject such good fortune, you would not, surely?"

"Nay, but I am in right good earnest," said the Duke, colouring with eagerness; and, hastily averting his eye to avoid the gaze of the Count, he turned to the King. "Here is proof, your Majesty, that I do not jest;" he

thrust his hand hurriedly into his bosom, and drew forth a packet; he appeared conscious that the Count glanced suspiciously towards him, for he did not raise his eyes in speaking: "It is the paper, La Vallée, you sent to my apartment this morning; the marriage contract," he continued hurriedly, "which your Majesty had promised me to sign. Look, Sire, I have erased the settlement of Avilly; for in short, I—I hate the place; there is a curse upon it—the very air is melancholy. Even Estelle has lost all her gaiety since she breathed it; has she not, La Vallée? I must, in truth, bear her hence to Montbel, that she may quickly recover all her wonted gladness."

It was evident to La Vallée, whose suspicions once aroused rendered him clear-sighted almost to a miracle, that much of de Montbel's merriment was forced. He talked, but knew not what he was saying; there was a trepidation about his manner, so unusual, that it raised the Count's curiosity, and made him resolve to watch his rival narrowly; and when the latter

opened the packet, he remarked that his hand trembled so violently that he could scarcely lay it before the King.

"Here it is, your Majesty," said he; "it is rather lengthy—ha! ha!—for our friend the Count loves—ha! ha!—loves to be—psha! I know not what I do," he continued, hurriedly snatching it up and placing another in its stead; "it was the plan for a merry masque, a mystery with which I had secret intent to regale the Court on my bridal day."

But Henry was no keen observer; he was too happy at sight of de Montbel's mirth to doubt that it was real, and he gaily exclaimed, as his eye glanced over the paper,

"By Heavens, *mon compère*, thou art right, it is a dreary place. Why, in the whole land there is not open space enough even to let fly a short-winged goshawk. Thou dost well; we'll to Nantes, *mon compère*, we'll to Nantes. Dost remember what happy days we spent there—heigho!—with Quélus and Saint Maigrin? We'll hence directly; d'Espignac may have

all, even Chantilly too, if it so please him, for I do not love it well enough ever to return."

"Nay, but—" said de Montbel, with a kindly smile, "there is no need for such a step. Adhémar, methinks, would have many hearts to pierce ere he could reach your Majesty; and moreover, I know not, in truth, what the world would say, were the hero of Jarnac and Moneontour to seem to shrink from an encounter with yonder helpless fugitive. But I know that the young man has no thought of treason; rely on it, he has no design against your Majesty;—he—he—"

"Ha, my Lord! how know you that?" said La Vallée, a sudden suspicion flashing across his mind, which was more than expressed in his scrutinizing glance.

De Montbel quailed beneath it. He hesitated, and appeared confused; but by a sudden effort he recovered his wonted self-possession, and answered poudly,—

"Because, he is brave, and a soldier, Mon-

sieur de la Vallée. He has held with glory the standard of de Guise; and it were small compliment to the royalists to say this was an easy task, and could be borne in battle without danger."

"It matters not, de Montbel," interrupted Henry, already fretting at the prospect of another rupture between the two courtiers. "What can it signify, Monsieur de la Vallée? We will depart hence as quickly as in all convenience we may; but, for Heaven's sake! Messieurs, let us preserve tranquillity while we do remain. In sooth," he continued, wiping his forehead, as if exhausted with exertion, "these broils do us injury: they keep us in a fever; we like not to have our peace thus invaded. We have not known a quiet moment since first we came here. We will seek some other spot, where there are no rebels, or gloomy forests to conceal them."

"But, your Majesty, I pray you consider," said the Duke, still much embarrassed; "the

King of Navarre will not love to be thus tampered with ; he was summoned hither to arrange the treaty, and—”

“ True, true, de Montbel,” interrupted the King, affectionately—“ Ah ! thou hast ever our honour and good name at heart ; we had forgotten de Bourbon. But it is a lucky thought ; we will send to him this instant, and know when it will suit him to sign the treaty. Would it were this very moment, so impatient are we to quit this accursed place.”

De Montbel turned deadly pale at these words, and La Vallée, who was ever on the watch, started to see the change in his countenance, but said not a word, being content to observe the result in silence.

“ Be not in haste, I pray your Majesty,” said the Duke, unable to control his eagerness, “ I—I—not at present. If it so please you, I myself will do the errand. You can depend upon me, Sire. His Majesty the King of Navarre turned back to the forest ; he is

gone to take a solitary ride ; perchance he has—But, stay—I will go and ascertain if he be yet departed.”

He sprang to the door while he spoke, as though he feared detention.

“ There is no need that thou shouldst go, de Montbel,” exclaimed the King ; “ the page will do as well : call Levasseur, let him run and learn if the King of Navarre has yet ridden out.”

“ Nay, nay, it is too much honour—too much honour to bear a message from your Majesty,” returned the Duke, leaving the apartment while he yet spoke, and shutting the door in such agitation, that the long feathers of the velvet cap which he bore in his hand, forced back by the draught, were caught in the doorway. Henry called to him to stop ; but he tore them impatiently away, leaving the remnants of the costly plumes to flutter for a moment in the air, and then to fall unheeded to the ground.

“ How impatient, all at once, is de Mont-

bel grown," said the King, as he saw him depart. "See, in his haste he has ruined the rich *panache*, for which many of the Court ladies would have sighed. In truth, methinks the very air of this place has the effect of making men hot and intemperate; if I make not haste to depart, I shall have all my Court like firebrands about me."

La Vallée, however, heard not what the King was saying. He had opened the casement, and was stretching out over the parapet, while Henry, ere yet the Duke could have had time to descend the staircase, had begun to wonder at his long absence, and to grow impatient for his return. At any other time La Vallée would have sought to improve the few moments he was left alone with the King in setting forth his own merits and traducing his rival, but now he fancied he might possess himself of the clue to some mystery, which, by creating jealousy and suspicion, would injure de Montbel more effectually than all that he could say to his dis-

paragement, and he watched in silence his progress across the court-yard.

“ It is as I thought !” he exclaimed joyously ;
“ I pray your Majesty walk hither but for an instant ! See you, Sire. Well, well, it is meet to be on equal good terms with all. It would seem, in truth, that your Majesty is not the only one who has found out many virtues in de Montbel !”

This intimation had the desired effect ; a sudden pang of jealousy shot through the bosom of the King as he drew near and beheld the young Duke spring across the court-yard towards the apartments of the King of Navarre, and, as though as much accustomed to uncereemonious admission there as to the apartments of his own sovereign, rush up the steps into the vestibule without pause, the sentinel at the door merely presenting arms to the ribbon of the Holy Ghost which he wore round his neck.

The monarch was somewhat surprised and

piqued to witness such strong proof of the freedom which must of necessity exist between the man whom he had thought so exclusively his own, and him whom, in spite of himself, he could not help regarding as his rival. He leaned with both his hands upon the latchet of the casement, while the gloomy sadness which he had at first betrayed in his conversation with La Vallée appeared in some measure to return. He sighed deeply, and said in a melancholy tone—

“Ay, it is well! it is well! he is but like the rest! All turn from the fading glories of the setting sun, that the first ray of the rising one may shed its kindly influence over their heads.”

“Nay, but your Majesty cannot surely think that de Bourbon has any share in the love of your people,” returned the wily Count, artfully endeavouring to draw the King into a serious conversation ere the Duke returned.

“Psha! think not to beguile us, La

Vallée," answered the King, falling into the snare; "we know well enough that the Huguenot hath won the love of all whose love is worth the having;—but then—ha!—but then—We would say that the death of de Guise, which the people have laid to our charge, has somewhat dispelled the reverence which was once felt for any thing belonging to our father. And yet we did but follow our royal mother's stern advice—which in duty we were bound to do—were we not, La Vallée? A parent can best tell what is most fitting for the welfare of a child—ha!—tell us, Sir Count, you who have a daughter, do you not counsel her in the right way? and watch over her to keep her from evil?"

He appeared agitated, and turned from the casement. The question was a home-thrust for La Vallée, who remembered how hard he had laboured to turn to selfish ambition all the generous nature of Estelle, and he answered nothing. But the conscience-stricken

monarch, striving to shake off remorse, resumed :—

“ But why should we repent? did he not deserve it? De Guise, the proud, the insolent, who would for ever beard the King his master! No, no, we regret not his death; but— that is, we would say we do but repent the manner of his death. Would to Heaven we had done as Mornay counselled! Why did we not bring him to justice? Would not our people, who loved us then, have pronounced a just sentence?”

This was the very point at which the Count wished to arrive. He had expected it; for this regret was ever uppermost in the bosom of the King.

“ Nay, nay,” said he, “ your Majesty was surely right to make all secure. Mornay counselled you to risk the issue; but whom can we trust?” pointing with consummate art to the door by which de Montbel had entered the apartments of the King of Navarre.

“ True, true,” said Henry, hastily ; “ Catherine our mother was right. Mornay had doubtless in view some other motive than our honour thus to advise us. It would have been our own fate ere long, if we had let de Guise go unharmed.”

“ Her Majesty,” replied La Vallée, “ was ever bold and steady in her counsels. She did not waver or hesitate to rid herself of all who were obnoxious, or she would not have thus lived to see three of her princely sons upon the throne. I warrant me she would not for a day have suffered a rebel to roam in freedom the very woods which bound the palace.”

“ Thou art right, thou art right,” returned the King, trembling as he spoke—“ thou art right ; we thought not of this. She would soon have removed all cause of fear and dread. If her spirit were ours, we should do likewise :” he paused, and looked around in affright, “ But then—but then—”

“ I pray your Majesty waver not,” said the

Count, eagerly profiting by this indecision ;
“ think but for a moment ; this young man
is d’Espignac, and not de Guise ; no one
need know our intent, and—”

“ No, no, no ! we will not hear of it, La Vallée,” exclaimed the King, with a sudden effort, starting back in horror, and placing both his hands to his ears, as if to shut out the sound of the tempter’s voice ; but the next moment he returned to La Vallée’s side, and said in a low tone of horror, “ Thou wouldst not urge it, La Vallée, if thou couldst but know all that I have suffered— Oh ! thou canst not even guess ! My crown was one of thorns long, long ere de Guise’s death ; but now it wounds me no more ! Knowest thou why ? It is not that the deed has released me from my cares—no, no !—the crown that once pressed so heavy on my brow is gone—ay, gone for ever ! It is Henry of Navarre who wears it now, and I must be content with the vain semblance—the dark and

searing mark which it has left behind ! Ha, ha ! is it not strange that this arm, that once felled hosts of enemies at Jarnac, has now not even strength to wield the sceptre of my kingdom ?”

It seemed as though all the grief and remorse which had lain dormant in his bosom burst forth at once ; he leaned his head against the window, while a cold shudder crept through his whole frame, and shame and horror were imprinted on his countenance. But La Vallée would not yield ; he knew that he could soon weaken this feeble resistance, and he was resolved to persist.

“ But methinks, Sire,” said he, appearing not to observe the violent emotion by which the King was agitated, “ if you were but to follow the bold counsel—such, for example, as her Majesty Queen Catherine would have deemed it no crime to give—in quieting, by the sure and certain means within your power, all malcontents, who do but serve to shake your Majesty’s throne. Now, here is d’Espig-

nac, for instance; has he not vowed revenge! And is it prudent? In short, I dare not tell your Majesty all I think—indeed I know that—that—nay, it is certain, from all I have witnessed of the King of Navarre, that he is favouring this forester!”

The right chord was touched.

“Ha!” exclaimed Henry, while his eye flashed as once it was wont, ere sorrow had dimmed its lustre; “What! does he already think to brave us by favouring our enemies? Nay, nay, we must see to it—he is not yet sovereign of this kingdom! we have not *quite* resigned our power, nor shall he pretend with impunity even to *share* our throne!”

The Count could not forbear a smile as he reflected on the powerless situation of the King, and that he was speaking of the very man to whom but a short time before he had sued for aid with humble supplication; but it was La Vallée’s interest to excite distrust in his mind, and he pursued:

“ Yes, Sire ! I know by many tokens that it is true ; nay, more, I strongly suspect that he will make his restoration to his land a clause in the agreement. But it is not strange he should love d’Espignac, even though he has sworn vengeance on your Majesty. And de Montbel, too, mark you how he has spurned the gift of Avilly ! Have a care, Sire ! De Bourbon has a winning tongue—the young Duke’s heart is tender—he might—”

“ We see it all—we see it all !” exclaimed the King, now quite bewildered by the subtle arguments of the Count ; “ thou art right, La Vallée ; it must be done : d’Espignac must die ! or, see you, we may lose our throne, and, what is yet dearer to us, de Montbel’s love.”

“ Ay, but all this may be escaped,” said the Count quickly, allowing the King no time for reflection ; “ leave it to me, Sire. De Montbel has resigned his claim to the estate. It is mine now—wholly mine. I will take heed that none shall ever arise to dispute my right.”

"Ay, do it, La Vallée," said the King, grasping the Count by the arm; "in truth, you are well fitted for such a ruthless deed: But—" his voice dropped to a lower key—"List you! you know not the long, long days and sleepless nights of the murderer! Ha! were you mine hated enemy, I would not wish a more sure revenge than your own thoughts when the deed is done." He gasped with a kind of convulsive horror, and drew yet closer to the Count. "But mind," he continued impressively, and laying his finger on the arm of his attentive listener—"mind you, Sir Count, trust to none—track him—lay in wait—rush on him, when he thinketh none are nigh. Others may aid in discovering his place of refuge; but, O God! I shudder but to think of all that I have suffered. Let none taunt you in the hour of death with *their* soul's damnation! Do it—do it! I shall rejoice when it is done; but, alas! alas! you know not how dearly you will have purchased Avilly!"

He opened the long doors of the casement as he concluded, and leaving the Count to the enjoyment of his own reflections, he stepped out, and soon walked beyond view of the apartment. He was, in truth, indignant with himself. He durst not for a moment think on the guilty weakness of the act he had just committed. His first impulse was to fly beyond reach of the evil counsellor; and it seemed, indeed, as though a burthen were taken off his mind when he no longer beheld the Count. He would not trust himself to dwell on the remembrance of Adhémar d'Espignac, but striving to drown his own remorse in the surprise and curiosity occasioned by de Montbel's entrance into the King of Navarre's apartment, he prepared to await his return, watching the door at which he would most probably re-appear with a vague feeling of anger and jealousy, in which he but too well knew that he had no right to indulge.

But in minds so indolent and volatile as was that of Henry de Valois, grief and remorse are

not suffered long to hold a place, and a trifling circumstance soon changed the whole current of his thoughts from self-condemnation to a tumult of pleasure, inspired by a full return of his confidence in de Montbel's faith.

He had raised himself so as to be seated on the top of the balustrade, where, amid Cupids, Psyches, Gods, Goddesses, and Italian vases, with his arms folded, he suffered his legs to dangle in most unkingly indolence; and soon all the sorrow and repentance, which almost the very instant previous had appeared to wring his very heart's core, were for the moment consigned to oblivion, amid the childish delight with which he listened to a conversation between two of the grooms of the household who were standing beneath the wall.

"Did you see the young Duke de Montbel?" said one, "how hurriedly he rushed from the King's apartment! I fear me some mischance has happened: verily I hope he is not disgraced; what would become of King Henry

were the merry young Gascon to desert the Court? he would soon be devoured by the greedy courtiers. In spite of all his boyish foppery he is the best among them, and, moreover, the King's guardian angel. There is that old caitiff the Count de la Vallée, (old enough in years to be his Majesty's grandfather,) ever on the watch to take advantage of his inexperience. He has endeavoured to poison his mind against the Duke, and—"

"Pooh! pooh!" interrupted the other impatiently, "depend on it the Duke is not disgraced: friends are not so numerous now as once they were; the King has too much sense to banish the only real one who remains. No, no, rely on it, de Montbel has only been beaten at *hombre*; it is this that causeth his agitation. Now, at an onset or an argument, methinks de Montbel has the palm of excellence; but for skill in all kinds of royal pastimes there is none like King Henry."

"Psha!" again spoke his companion, with

whom de Montbel seemed the greatest favourite, "it is courtesy *alone* which causeth the Duke to suffer himself to be vanquished even at play. I tell thee, Victor, there is nothing in which de Montbel is not the superior."

"Save in the art of choosing his friends," said Victor laughing.

"No; there I grant you that the King has displayed the greatest tact: but for *hombre*,—ah! when the Duke plays with d'Alençon—"

"Hush! here he comes down from the King of Navarre, let him not hear us speak without reverence of the King, for he has ever his master's honour at heart, even more than his own!"

The King could listen no further, for he was in haste to return in order to meet the favourite. He re-entered the apartment, where La Vallée yet remained, with a light heart and joyous countenance. The doubt of de Montbel's fidelity was taken off his mind, and he would not even remember La Vallée's suspicion

concerning him ; it was wholly forgotten, and the Count himself only remembered as “the old caitiff who would take advantage of his inexperience.” He was overjoyed that all knew de Montbel to be faithful, and he was overjoyed, too, that he could beat him at *hombre*.

The Count was somewhat surprised at the sudden change in the manner of the King. He had gone out in anguish, and returned, after a few moments’ absence, in an exuberance of gladness ; and this was redoubled when the next instant De Montbel entered the apartment. The latter, too, seemed in a merry mood ; his agitation had wholly left him, and, evidently intent upon some mirthful adventure, he began,—

“ So please your Majesty, the King of Navarre says—”

“ Tut ! tut ! I care not what says the King of Navarre,” interrupted Henry ; “ I cannot attend to the treaty to-day ; I have no time. I want thee now to play with me at *hombre*.

Ha ! ha ! ha ! I can beat thee any day ! Down with thy golden marks, de Montbel ; I will soon see if it be mere courtesy that maketh thee to seem vanquished."

The Duke was evidently taken by surprise, but it was to his interest to keep the King in good-humour, and he exclaimed—

"If it so please your Majesty, we will fall to play this instant ; but, methinks, as the message from the King of Navarre is merely an excuse for his non-attendance, it may please your Majesty to hear it. He waited—ha ! ha !—but for a change of apparel, having too much respect unto your Majesty to appear in a homely suit. He has despatched D'Aubigné to Creil, where his baggage yet remains, to fetch his velvet pourpoint ; and he strongly suspects, from the length of time he has already been absent, that D'Aubigné himself—ha ! ha !—nay, it is wrong to laugh at his dilemma—D'Aubigné himself, whose purse and wardrobe are somewhat like those of his master, the

most worthless things about him, has profited by his near vicinity to Viller Cotteret to pay a visit to the chateau, where, it is well known, there is tender attachment, and has borne the pourpoint thither on his back, of course, for safety."

The King laughed heartily. "Poor de Bourbon!" said he good-naturedly, "his long campaigns and many battles have kept him but scantily provided with the appurtenances of royalty. We will present him with a piece of the richest velvet as a token of our esteem; and do thou, our Chamberlain, see that it be got in readiness. It is lucky it has so chanced. We cannot attend to business again to-day; we will play at *hombre*, *mon compère*. La Vallée, we seek not to detain thee; Montbel and ourself would love to be alone; if thou likest, thou mayest depart. Ah! art thou not content to hear the words? Well do we mind what joy they once would give our brothers and ourself, when summoned by the King our

father to listen to his endless injunctions concerning virtue, and honour, and the cares and miseries of royalty, until verily we began to deem the having a royal father not the least of these; and although the Queen our mother, grieving to see us thus immured, would often send for us to take part in the fêtes and revels which she gave expressly for our amusement, we never could escape till she herself came to fetch us."

His Majesty was busily occupied while he was speaking in assisting the Duke to clear the table, being too impatient even to summon the page in waiting. He did not look at La Vallée, or he would have seen that he was not quite so content as he had imagined. De Montbel could not repress a smile at the uncereemonious manner of the dismissal; but the Count, who was unaccustomed to the unthinking ways of the sovereign, sullenly withdrew, inwardly cursing his own destiny which had thus made him dependent for advancement on the whims and caprices

of two headstrong beardless boys, as he secretly denominated de Montbel and his royal master.

Henry raised his eyes when the Count had departed, and after listening to his retreating step, he turned to de Montbel and exclaimed,

“If thou wert not really in love with Mademoiselle de la Vallée, we would counsel thee not to wed her. Yonder Count is a very curse at Court, and one, moreover, whom we never will admit to audience again. Lo! you, he has entered here in his hunting-dress, and without so much as even wiping the dust from his boots. Pah! the chamber must be perfumed for months ere it regain its former fragrance. And what thinkest thou? it is an old caitiff who would seek to take advantage of our inexperience—ha! ha! ha!—we will tell thee all concerning it at some future time, but now let us forget him, and fall to *hombre* without delay.”

The young Duke, although curious to learn what had taken place during his absence, knew his royal master too well to risk offending him

by appearing too eager at that moment, and seated himself at the table, while the King shuffled and sorted the cards, talking all the while of the chances of the game with as much thoughtless impatience for diversion, as though Adhémar d'Espignac had not existed, or that Henry de Guise had not been murdered by his command.

CHAPTER IX.

“What if (since daring on so nice a theme)
I show thee friendship delicate as dear?”

YOUNG.

THE young Duke's courtship was now fast drawing to a close. Every moment that could be stolen from the King was spent at Avilly, in the society of his betrothed bride. His happiness was the theme of every tongue; he was envied by all: for among the ladies of the Court was not one who in beauty could vie with Estelle. His love increased with each hour, and grew almost to adoration, when he discovered that she grieved not, but rejoiced, that Avilly would not be hers. He would talk with her himself of the loss of the rich estate of

which she had so long been regarded as the heiress, that he might judge with his own understanding and not be deceived. His joy was unbounded to find that her spirit was congenial to his own—generous and disinterested; that she valued not wealth and power, nor sought to be enriched with the spoils of another, even though the shades of Avilly had evidently become too dear to leave without regret.

In the fulness of his heart he would, as it were, hold forth a promise of recompense; he would unfold many a brilliant prospect of greatness and distinction, of far-spreading fame and courtly honours. But he soon found, by the mournful silence with which she listened, that her delight was not in riches; and then, still striving to dissipate the unaccountable melancholy which had so lately overshadowed her youthful spirit, he would tell of his own princely home, in smiling, merry Gascony—his almost regal domains on the fertile banks of the Garonne. He would promise her the ready, will-

ing love of countless bands of contented vassals, by whom he himself was idolized ; and then he would speak of his aged mother, the holy Abbess of Fougère, who waited but to know the bride of her own Achilles to receive her with open arms, ay, and with open heart, and place her there for ever by his side, and whose affections she would bid her share with him who had hitherto engrossed them all.

But here he was doomed to disappointment : Estelle would listen, and in silence ; but the same wan smile would for ever greet his most ardent protestations, and show that her thoughts were far away, and that she knew not of what he spoke.

Any other would have wearied with such fruitless assiduity ; but de Montbel was a Gascon, and, affectionate and generous even for one of that warm-hearted race, he would resolve not to pause in his endeavours to restore that *gaieté de cœur* which had charmed his soul in bygone days.

Estelle was surprised to find him thus good and generous, whom her father had pronounced sordid and ambitious; and yet strange, she grieved the more. She pitied him—she felt indignant with herself that she loved him not. There were even times when she would question her own conscience. She would ask if de Montbel were not in every respect the superior by far of him who had thus stolen away her heart. Each day would more and more remove the thin veil of boyish foppery beneath which every great, and good, and noble quality lay hid. Generosity and single-heartedness, an almost romantic devotion in friendship as in love, were found to dwell within his breast; while fierce pride and unchristianlike desire of revenge seemed hitherto to have ruled every thought and action of Julian l'Evêque. The high-born de Montbel had wooed her with fond vows of idolizing love, while Julian had never breathed one tender word, nor looked one tender look while she was by. De Mont-

bel laid at her feet honours, titles, a long descended name and princely fortune, while Julian—but, alas! alas! when once her thoughts had strayed thus far, de Montbel was forgotten, and she wept over the sorrows of the homeless Ligueur.

From the day of the arrival of the King at Chantilly she had not seen old Jacqueline; her father had forbidden all visits to her cottage, fearful that her errand there might be discovered; and although murmuring at his own evil destiny in failing to apprehend Count Adhémar, yet did he rejoice that there was one point gained—he had seen him, and knew that he was in the wood. Estelle herself desired it not, for she wandered no more alone to the forest. De Montbel was now for ever at her side, and to have led him there would have been of a surety to betray Julian.

The Duke was now the chief, the almost sole support of the royalist cause; and Henry de Valois, whose feelings and interests were equal-

ly bound to the favourite, hurried his marriage by every means in his power, that he might depart from Chantilly as soon as it should be concluded. From the day that La Vallée had recounted to the King his adventure in the forest, no persuasion could induce him to venture beyond the precincts of the palace, having the fear of Adhémar d'Espignac for ever before his eyes. In this he was encouraged by the Count, who himself took no delight in the chase, and secretly feared the influence of the Duke in his absence. But Henry de Navarre, over whose youthful spirit care and grief touched but lightly, would still continue to hunt as merrily as ever. It was a matter of surprise that he should have remained thus long in apparent inertness. The Ligueurs were still shut up in Paris, and it was believed that he still, amid all his apparent security, kept anxious watch over their movements; but whatever were his designs, they were locked within his own bosom, and all were content to

approve his measures, in full confidence in his talents and courage.

The nuptials of the Duke de Montbel with the heiress of La Vallée were looked forward to with eagerness, as a relief to the tedious monotony of Court retirement ; and the King, who was now circumscribed in his amusements, and could no longer resort as usual to the forest, busied himself in plans and preparations for the divers fêtes and revels which were to be given on the occasion, whereby he proved how much he wished to honour the favourite, and created diversion for himself. As far as the reduced state of the royal coffers would permit, no expense was spared ; fireworks and waterworks, and masques and mysteries, and processions and pageantries, were all got up under his own superintendence ; and as no one, not even the most inveterate of his enemies, had ever questioned the superiority of his judgment in matters of this kind, it was quite natural that nothing else should be thought of at the

palace, and that treaties and bonds, and battles and sieges, should be entirely forgotten, or deemed affairs of minor importance, to be attended to at convenient opportunity, and when he was once more at leisure.

When the preparations were all completed, it was a matter of course that the bride should be invited to witness them, and accordingly de Montbel was despatched with a message from the King to bring her to the palace; for the Monarch's chief occupation consisted in planning and plotting and manœuvring for amusement, and was delighted beyond measure to find an excuse for putting off dulness, at all events for a day.

With unusual good fortune, considering that Henry's whole soul was bent upon this display, every thing succeeded to his entire satisfaction. The stone Tritons threw out exactly the proper quantity of water from their tin trumpets; the dragons bellowed forth the due proportion of fire from their leathern jaws.

The performers in the masque played their respective parts to a miracle: Peace and Plenty, Virtue and Godliness, all came in at the precise moment, to lay their pasteboard fruit and paper flowers at the maiden's feet, and when at sunset she took her departure, under the escort of de Montbel, Henry was fully convinced, that if she appeared not happy, it could not be that any thing was wanting in the arrangement of the festivals that he had planned to do her honour.

The young Duke was at the summit of happiness as he rode towards Avilly by the side of Estelle, and his light tone and mirthful laugh echoed back, and raised many a nod and wink among the train of servants, who kept at respectful distance behind. It was already evening, almost twilight; but de Montbel hurried not forward. He curbed the proud paces of his noble steed to those of the ambling palfrey upon which Estelle was mounted, that he might prolong the sweet converse in which

he was engaged. It might, perhaps, with more truth, have been termed soliloquy, for the maiden answered not, nor even returned a smile to all his winning pleasantry. Sadness was on her spirit; she knew the Duke was by her side, and that he was whispering in her ear; but save when his words were uttered in an interrogatory tone, they fell unheeded, and passed without comment. De Montbel could not see her countenance, it was concealed by the black velvet mask, worn by ladies of distinction, to screen them from the atmosphere; but he felt that she was melancholy, and by degrees this feeling was contagious; it caught even his light and joyous spirit. His merry laugh was heard less often, his pauses were longer and more frequent, and when he did speak, his voice sank to a low, subdued murmur.

He now repented having thus loitered on his way, for darkness seemed suddenly gathering, and the sun had set amid red and lurid clouds,

betokening the approach of a storm. Already were the big drops of rain beginning to descend, and he urged his steed onward with greater haste, as they had yet more than half the distance to traverse, and the more they receded from the precincts of the palace, the more gloomy did the forest become. He grew uneasy as the darkness rapidly increased, and the rain began to fall with augmenting violence; his first thought was of Estelle, and with kindly foresight he stopped instantly, and loosening the jewelled clasps of his velvet mantle, he enveloped her graceful form in its rich folds.

The precaution was not ill-timed, for ere long a flash of lightning shot across the heavens, dazzling their sight by its vivid brightness, and a distant peal of thunder reverberated through the dark wood; while with that suddenness so general in thunder-storms, the skies poured down their wrath upon their heads. It soon became necessary to seek shelter where the branches were thicker, for neither the satin

brocade in which Estelle was attired, nor the velvet doublet of de Montbel, were much calculated to resist the pelting of the shower.

There was a narrow pathway on one side of the *carrefour*, towards which the Duke, gently taking the bridle-rein of Estelle's palfrey to guide its steps with more safety, directed his course with all possible speed. He turned with the intention of bidding the domestics follow; but they had seemingly loitered in their paces, for they were not in sight, nor was any answer returned to his repeated calls; but he believed that the path which they were about to take led to the chateau,—a foot-path, or perchance a bridle-road; and they proceeded onward.

So long as the least glimpse of daylight could be observed through the tangled boughs above, the awfulness of their position was not so apparent, but even these grew fainter as the day passed away and darkness set in, while the storm continued to rage with unabated violence, and each moment added to

the horror of their situation. De Montbel strenuously endeavoured to cheer his companion ; he essayed to jest on the doleful adventure which had befallen them ; and now and then, as the lightning's flash showed the gay knots of ribbon which served to fasten his dress, all drooping and streaming with wet, and the snowy plume of his cap now lying flat upon his shoulders, he would laugh at the pitiable condition to which in so short a space he had been reduced.

Thus did they proceed for a time in doubt and anxiety, the pathway becoming more and more intricate as they advanced ; and it soon became painfully evident from the distance they had already traversed since leaving the grand route, that instead of leading to the vicinity of the chateau as they had at first imagined, it appeared to diminish in width as they advanced, and was most probably lost amid the very bosom of the wood.

Estelle, whose equanimity had hitherto been

admirable, now became dreadfully agitated. De Montbel too was perplexed, he knew not what plan to pursue ; it was useless, nay, dangerous to proceed ; the ground was covered with brush and furze, fostered to rank luxuriance by shade and solitude, and where this impediment did not exist, it was rendered soft and slippery from the splashing of the rain, and the dripping of the trees. The high met-tled steed of the Duke began to exhibit symptoms of uneasiness as the lightning flashed fierce before his eyes, and his continued curvetings and fretful impatience greatly added to the peril of their situation.

To return was impossible, and amid all these difficulties de Montbel chose, perhaps, the wisest course ; he resolved to secure the horses, and retreat into the thicket. Estelle did not oppose his design, and, dismounting in silence, she followed where he led. They knew not the hour, but they were conscious that much time had passed away during their te-

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dious progress up the narrow path. No sound was heard save the beating of the rain and the noise of the thunder, now rattling loud above their heads, now rolling in solemn grandeur as it died away in the distance,—and no light was to be seen save the vivid flash by which it was preceded. And thus they had to wait with patience till the first glimpse of dawn should enable them to distinguish their way homeward.

Their situation was dreadful, and yet de Montbel frankly owned to himself that he had known many a less happy moment. Estelle was by his side; to him alone did she look for protection. They stood together upon the slight mound formed by the roots of a wide-spreading oak, whose branches promised safer shelter from the wet. His arm encircled her slender waist, her fairy hand reposed within his own, her head reclined upon his shoulder, while he fondly whispered encouragement and consolation in her ear.

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He was congratulating himself on their apparent security, and already beginning to forget the many perils which had threatened them. The storm was fast abating ; each flash became less powerful, and the pause which succeeded ere the thunder was heard became far more protracted.

It was during one of these, while listening in awful suspense, that amid the silence, de Montbel fancied that a sound was borne back by the echo far more horrible than even the loudest crash of the tempest. He spoke not, but Estelle drew yet closer to his side, and leaned with greater stress upon his arm. She too had heard it, though only for a moment ; each unwilling to create groundless alarm in the mind of the other, remained silent. But no,—they could not be deceived : again was it heard ;—it could not be the wind, for not a breath stirred the branches over their heads. Nearer it came,—more frightful yet,—the fierce, the dismal howl of the hungry forest wolf !

Estelle shrieked in wild dismay, as, in helpless terror, she clung yet closer to de Montbel. The heart of the young Duke was brave, and hitherto had known no fear, but now the thought of his companion's danger blanched his cheek, and caused him to tremble. He remembered, too, that he was unarmed, for the courtly rapier at his side was but little calculated to sustain the rude attack to which he might so soon be exposed.

"Let us fly! let us fly! In mercy let us seek another path," said Estelle in a short hurried whisper; "heard you that dreadful sound?—how near it came? we are in danger; we—"

Again did that horrid yell break upon the stillness, now almost close at hand, and too savage to leave a doubt of its direful import.

De Montbel was agonized; he called,—he almost shrieked for aid. His gallant steed, at the sound of his voice, neighed joyously in the distance, but that was the only answer re-

turned. There was a spring among the bushes—Estelle uttered a faint scream, and hid her face upon de Montbel's shoulder. He clasped her in his arms: his heart beat with violence. He could hear the fierce panting of the ravenous animal as it approached. Despair lent him strength: with a desperate effort he rushed through the brambles, tearing or trampling down every impediment in his path, and, leading, or rather bearing the terrified Estelle, fled amid the darkness he knew not whither. They heard the dreadful howl, perhaps of disappointment, which issued from the spot where they had stood a few short moments before. Onward they went, until forced to pause from fatigue and exhaustion.

De Montbel turned and looked around, as if he had expected, even through the murky gloom, to behold the shadow of their fell pursuer, whose wild unearthly warning yet rang in their ears.

“ Poor Gris-de-lin ! Poor Blanche fleur ! ”

said he, as the thought of the too probable fate which awaited the gallant steed and the gentle palfrey crossed his mind.

Estelle was apparently occupied with her own reflections, for she answered not; and while he was wondering at her want of sympathy, she seized his arm convulsively, and pointing forward to a narrow opening among the trees, exclaimed in a tone of delight,

“ Look yonder, M. de Montbel ! Thanks be rendered to our holy mother, who has guided aright her distressed children ! See you yonder gleaming light ? It is doubtless from some woodman’s cabin, and we may yet hope for rest and shelter.”

No sight could be more welcome to de Montbel. He was, in fact, so overjoyed, that he paused not to wonder he had not before beheld it, but hurried forward, too glad to see it, too eager to reach it, to think of any thing besides.

To gain the spot whence it proceeded was a

task of no small difficulty, and somewhat enraged de Montbel, who swore that the churlish inhabitant of the cabin had purposely made it thus difficult of access, that he might not be troubled with benighted travellers. It would have seemed almost as if he had spoken truth, for the way was unusually encumbered and intricate; and had it not been that the steady shining light acted as their guide, they must have missed the path even in that short distance.

They could no longer proceed side by side. De Montbel walked in advance, and many times had he to pause to hold back by main force the straggling boughs, that Estelle might pass through in safety; and as he tore away the clustering ivy which wandered across the path from tree to tree, and seemed to bar the passage to all intruders, the mournful cry of the owl, or the fluttering of the bat, on being disturbed from their repose, would startle the adventurers with the fancy that they were not alone in that deep solitude.

It was not without much toil and difficulty that they succeeded at length in reaching the cabin. To describe the feelings of the Duke would be impossible ; the thought of obtaining shelter for Estelle made him almost wild with joy ; he called and shouted in every variety of tone, and when he found no answer was returned, he only laughed loud, and vowed that those who could sleep thus on such a night, if he had his will, should never waken.

Another moment, and their perseverance was well rewarded ; they stood before the hut, or rather shed, for it soon became evident that it possessed claims to no higher appellation. De Montbel called again repeatedly, and still could obtain no answer ; and this circumstance somewhat damped his joy, and caused him to examine the cabin more minutely than he otherwise would have done. The roof was merely formed of branches, artificially woven together ; the walls were of mud, and of irregular form, being propped by two stately trees, whose thick droop-

ing foliage, apparently bound together at the top, arched over the lowly habitation, and almost swept the very ground.

The place seemed altogether better adapted for concealment than convenience. Even the very door was ingeniously disguised on the outside by furze and brambles, and in noonday, and when closed, must have been imperceptible. It was now open. A pine log roaring and blazing on the hearth, and sending forth its red glare from within, enabled the Duke to discern what has been described. A thick bed of osiers fenced the whole around, which, perhaps, even to this very night had seemed impenetrable, for it was evident that some one passing through in violent haste had recently trampled it down, as the footprints were yet discernible. The latter circumstance caused a strange and startling suspicion in the mind of the Duke. He would, perhaps, have remained irresolute, had not the horrid sound from which they were fleeing burst upon his ear more

savage than before. He paused not another instant, but sprang through the narrow opening to the threshold. He stood there and gazed within; a glance sufficed to show that the cottage was tenantless, and he entered, while Estelle, leaning on his arm, abandoned herself entirely to his guidance.

His first precaution on entering was to close the door, feeling a secret misgiving as to the character of the owner of the place, being convinced that no one who followed lawful calling could take up his abode in any spot so desolate as this. It seemed, indeed, to own as master one singularly regardless of personal convenience. No snug *bergère* or welcome *escarbelle*, usually found in the dwellings of the poorest peasantry, greeted the gaze of those who now sought its shelter. A camp trunk was the only seat visible; and eagerly seizing it, de Montbel placed it for Estelle before the blazing fire, which was the only cheerful thing in the whole apartment, and, full of nervous apprehensions, prepared to await the result.

He knew that many parts of the wood had long been infested by bands of desperate ruffians, who, belonging to no party, took advantage of the turbulence of the times to levy contributions upon all, and he much feared, from the general aspect of the place, that its owner was one of these; in short, that they had fallen into the very haunt of one of these lawless outcasts. It was evidently not the first time that he had been abroad that night, for the fire had apparently been raised thus high for the purpose of drying a large military watch-cloak which hung dripping before it absolutely soaked with wet; and throwing into deep and gloomy shadow every object beyond.

As the Duke gazed around, he perceived other tokens to induce a belief that he who had made this his retreat was no stranger to the turmoils of war. Over the chimney were arranged in scientific order divers implements of the chase; and beneath hung an old-fashioned helmet and antique shield, whose manifold

gashes and bruises plainly bespoke that they had seen goodly service; and yet the firelight was reflected in each as in a mirror; not a speck of dust dwelt on their polished surface, which seemed as though just fresh from the hand of the artificer. Here alone, too, was descried the only object approaching to ornament,—flowers bloomed even here! A long branch of the silvery forest-loving hawthorn was twined around the helmet, and drooped over the crest, fragrant, though faded, and shining sweetly amid the sterner trophies by which it was surrounded.

Near to this, against the wall, was nailed a scroll of parchment, and de Montbel, whose curiosity and uneasiness increased every moment, drew a stray twig from the blazing pine on the hearth, and advanced forward to examine it more closely. He started to recognize the royal signet and the well-known signature of the King, which had come too often before his eyes to render him for an instant doubtful. His surprise redoubled. It was the proclamation offer-

ing a heavy reward for the apprehension of the traitor—the outlaw—Adhémar de l'Epine, Count d'Espignac; declaring the confiscation of his land, the forfeit of his titles, and in the rude, uncourteous language of the law, denominating as bondsmen and villains, his heirs and descendants, and all of his name and family!

De Montbel had read the decree a thousand times before, but so great was his astonishment to meet with it in such a place, that he perused it in silence over and over again. He gazed on it in sadness, and sighed to think that here, on the very land where Count Adhémar had trod as master, one could be found base and treacherous enough to aspire to the reward, the very price of his blood; for with what other view could the document be thus carefully preserved?

His sigh was answered by one, deep and long-drawn as his own, so heavy and full of woe, that it startled him from his reverie, and he was almost incredulous when, upon turning, he

beheld beside him the light form of Estelle de la Vallée alone. It was fortunate that he saw not her countenance. It was concealed, as before stated, by the black velvet mask—the token among the fair French dames of nobility and fashion; for she too had sighed with heart-stricken grief and consuming regret. The sight of the simple flower which adorned the helmet had recalled to her mind the sad remembrance of that brief day of happiness which she had shared with Julian: a remembrance which had power to fill her heart with woe, as it did that of him for whom she pined with wild deceptive joy. She was confused when de Montbel turned, as though he could have divined what was passing in her thoughts.

“How lone and melancholy is the dwelling of the woodsman!” said she, casting a glance around; “little do we think, when seated in the social hall, the pine-log blazing on the hearth, of the hard life of the poor forester.”

“There is, indeed, sad lack of comfort with-

in," said de Montbel; "and yet, methinks, if I were master of this place, I should prefer its shelter to scouring the forest on such a night."

He turned aside while he was speaking, fearful of betraying the dread which agitated his mind, for he did not wish to impart to her his own alarm, as he began to entertain a secret hope that the forester might not return before they should take their departure.

He pursued his scrutinizing gaze to the furthest corner of the hut. Each object awakened attention; but one, beyond all others, caused his heart suddenly to beat thick and fast, and almost checked respiration. It was the lowly couch of its mysterious inmate, heedless of cold and damp, placed on the slimy earthen floor; but de Montbel had not forgotten those campaigns wherein he had earned fame and glory, and remembered the time when upon such a couch he had slept more sweetly than upon a bed of roses, and he

saw at a glance that here had reposed a soldier.

The coverlet was formed of the richest velvet, of the bright forest green. It was the housing of a war-horse, well worn where the saddle had pressed; but the gold stars, the costly embroidery, the long bullion fringe and drooping tassels, might have made it meet to receive a monarch's sleeping form, had not the haste with which its late occupant started from his slumber, displaced it slightly, and disclosed to view the heap of glistening leaves, which was all that lay between it and the bare earth.

The hand of the young Duke trembled, as he lifted the roll of green which had served as a pillow. Beneath it he found, with a slight feeling of anxiety, a forester's rifle, as if he who had so lately slept there, had lain down with thoughts of danger and resistance.

A sudden faintness came over de Montbel: a hope, a doubt, and then a fearful certainty,

as he unwound the roll of bright green silk, and the bounding stag, embroidered in the midst, proclaimed that it was the standard of the d'Espignacs that fluttered before his eyes. He staggered with surprise, and sank against the wall for support, and continued to gaze on it in silence, as though he had doubted if it were not a deception.

He was aroused by the soft accents of Estelle, calling in tones of distress upon his name. He started to behold her standing at some little distance, evidently overcome by terror, and in the attitude of listening. In an instant the banner fell from his hand, and he rushed towards her. He did not long remain at a loss to know the cause of her alarm, for suddenly a horrid yell of anguish rent the air. It was followed by a savage growl, a fierce baying of a hound; and he heard it with scarcely less affright than she herself had felt.

"Ah, you heard not the wild shout of exultation," said Estelle, in a hurried whisper.

"I called you many times; haply it was terror deprived me of speech; for—for—ah! hear it again!"

De Montbel shuddered as a loud shout arose almost close to the cottage; footsteps were distinctly heard approaching, and ere yet he could find resolution to speak, a hand was laid upon the latch. Apparently it yielded not readily enough to the stranger's touch, for uttering an exclamation of surprise, he turned away. The footsteps were heard receding from the cottage, and again all was silent.

It was well they did not hope that the cause of alarm was over. Scarcely had another moment elapsed ere the latch was again lifted; a low savage growl of a deep-mouthed blood-hound broke the momentary silence which ensued; a loud whistle was next heard, and then a word of encouragement. It was but a word—but the voice—oh, it thrilled to the very heart's core of Estelle de la Vallée. She was confused: she would have shrieked in terror but that she

dared not, and she gazed towards the door in mute agony.

It slowly opened. She stared wildly and gasped for breath, as the noble, the princely form of Julian l'Evêque, the hunter of the forest, crossed the threshold.

There was no hope, no further doubt ; for his lofty brow brooked not the lowly doorway ; and the broad beaver which should have concealed his features was in his hand. Apparently he saw not at first his unbidden guests ; for as he entered he turned to soothe and encourage with words of kindness his faithful hound, old Perceforêt, who seemed wounded and bleeding, and scarcely able to follow his master. It was not till the latter had advanced to within a few steps of where the intruders stood, that the loud breathing of Estelle caused him to raise his eyes. Their fierce glance fell straight upon de Montbel, his hand darted to his belt, the weapon which hung there, the large and heavy *couteau de chasse*, flew forth

with a hissing noise, and glittered in his upraised hand.

Estelle shrieked, and by an involuntary movement stepped before the Duke. Julian gazed at her for a moment, and in silence lowered his threatening arm,

“Who are you? and what seek you here?” said he, sternly.

Estelle trembled like the aspen leaf, as the Duke grasped her hand firmly, and replied with emphasis,—

“The Duke de Montbel, and—and—the Duchess, his wife, claim the shelter of your roof for a few short hours, till the storm shall have passed away.”

The maiden breathed once more. She cared not so that Julian did not know that it was herself; and she was inwardly grateful to de Montbel for his presence of mind.

The hunter drew nearer. He was evidently too much used to danger to be taken by surprise, for he looked again at the Duke, who

now stood in the full light of the blazing fire, and instantly sheathed the weapon.

"You are welcome, my Lord Duke," said he, stretching forth his hand, to the no small astonishment of Estelle, who had expected a very different greeting between the outlawed Ligueur and the Royalist chief; "thrice welcome. I do but grieve thus to receive you," casting a mournful look around; "you are right welcome to rest and shelter; I fear me this place can afford but little else."

De Montbel took the proffered hand with an eager generous grasp, and Estelle could perceive, so anxious was her glance, that he even pressed it warmly, and her heart at the moment swelled with gratitude towards him.

The hunter drew a torch from a bracket where it lay, and lighting it, placed it over the chimney. He bowed distantly to Estelle, and smiled—the cold, wan smile of mere courtesy;—he drew the chest upon which she had been before seated yet nearer to the

fire, and then, as though he fancied he had rendered his guests attention sufficient, he turned again to the faithful hound, who lay whining in agony and unable to advance, although evidently half forgetting his own pain in the anger inspired by the sight of strangers. Julian bent low and lifted him gently in his arms; he laid him carefully on the warm hearth, and knelt by his side. The hound looked fondly in his master's face, and groaned mournfully as he examined the gaping wound in his side. It was much lacerated, and bled profusely; its depth and extent seemed even to astonish the hunter, for he gazed on it for a moment in dismay, and suddenly raising his eyes to de Montbel, exclaimed, in the haughty tone to which he was wont at times to give way:—

“ My Lord, why sought you this spot? It is too far from the beaten track for you to have sought it without cause.”

Estelle trembled. She could perceive that de Montbel coloured, and even in that dim

light so fair was his brow, that the deep rose-tint was plainly visible.

“ My Lord,” he answered,—the word almost checked her respiration, for she knew not what effect such mockery would have upon the forester—“ My Lord, we should not thus have trespassed upon your hospitality for safety from the storm alone, but we were in danger from a wolf. I feared not for myself, but for my companion.”

He pointed to Estelle. Julian glanced towards her, and his brow relaxed. Apparently he had not heard the title by which the Duke had addressed him, or she well knew how different would have been his look.

“ Ha ! then,” exclaimed he hastily, “ the dappled steed and milk-white palfrey that were tied beneath the alder, down in the glen, were yours. If ye love them, ye should thank poor Perceforêt ; he has slain the wolf, and I fear me—but that it cannot be—that I am doomed to lose my last, my only friend ! ”

He paused for a moment, and patted the

hound, who looked up and fondly licked his hand. "See you the wound, my Lord Duke?" he continued quickly, and without raising his eyes, fearful to betray his emotion.

Estelle knew by this time how kind-hearted was de Montbel, but she knew also that he was quick in ire, and she could duly value his forbearance when he advanced at the bidding of Julian l'Evêque, as though the latter had given him no cause for anger, and with generous forgetfulness knelt by his side to examine the wound with an interest which even won a kindly smile from the hunter; and heedless of the manifest discontent of the now exhausted and powerless hound, the Duke even assisted to bind it up, and held the torch while Julian staunched the streaming gore.

The light of the torch fell full upon their faces as they knelt thus side by side; but Estelle gazed alone at the forester. She could have wept to see the change which so short a time had wrought in his appearance. It was

startling; and she remembered with a shudder all the dismal forebodings of poor Jacqueline. She thought his eyes were sunken, and their light more vivid, while his damp and pallid brow plainly told that the hectic on his cheek was treacherous. The rich curls, which had before clustered so thickly over his face, now hung looser and more neglected. He was evidently pleased with de Montbel's attention, for he smiled even kindly to witness his solicitude, but his smile was wan and ghastly, and afforded a striking contrast to that which illumined the joyous and dimpled countenance of the young Duke.

To Estelle the conduct of the latter appeared almost a marvel, for he seemed to have forgotten that he was a royalist, and that the youth beside him was a Ligueur. He talked with his usual ease upon the subject in which both were interested, prescribing remedies, and adducing instances of their successful application with the utmost good nature, and to the visible admira-

tion of the forester, whose brow relaxed by degrees, and whose voice gradually softened, until he appeared almost as cheerful as his visitor; nay, more, when the wounds of the noble animal were dressed, and nothing more remained to be done, he seated himself at the hearth, and continued to converse with the same warm-hearted kindness.

It was evident to Estelle that this was not the first time they had met, and she could not but perceive that each refrained with tacit courtesy from making the slightest allusion to their respective situations. They spoke no more of the adventures of that night, neither of their misfortune in losing their road in the forest, nor of the hungry wolf, for it seemed as though de Montbel knew the temper of his host; he reverted not to these even to breathe his thanks, when he gazed downward and beheld the wounded hound. Their conversation was on general topics; the young Duke was as usual full of mirthful anecdote, of de Guise's

Court, and King Henry's Court, and of the rival beauties who would for ever keep the whole world in a blaze, and of the petty spites and jealousies which served to stir up such deadly feuds amongst their respective cavaliers. All this was told with such wit and good-humour, that at length Julian could not choose but yield to the influence of his gentle spirit ; it seemed for a while to cheat him of his grief, and soon the low soft murmur of his voice was almost as often heard as the lighter tones of his companion. He had only once addressed Estelle, politely expressing a hope that she would not suffer from the cold, and that she found herself at ease ; she was embarrassed and confused, and had merely bowed in answer. He had perhaps mistaken it for hauteur and misplaced dignity, for he had turned away with sullen pride and spoke to her no more. De Montbel, too, seemed not to heed her presence, his good-humoured efforts to banish care kept him fully occupied, and thus time passed away, and they took no

note of its rapid flight. There is no knowing how long they might have lingered thus in friendly converse, had not old Perceforêt suddenly risen from the hearth and drawn closer to his master's feet. The quick glance of the latter plainly bespoke the anxiety he felt; he stooped and spoke low, thinking to soothe the pain of his dumb favourite, but the faithful animal would not be quieted; he moaned faintly and looked up, and then at the door of the cabin, and finally made a vain effort to crawl towards it. The hunter suddenly started from the position in which he had stood leaning against the breast-work of the wide-mouthed chimney, and opening the door looked out; he appeared to listen for a moment towards the forest, and then returned.

“It is dawn, my Lord,” said he, addressing the Duke; “the birds are stirring amid the branches; daylight but seldom enters here, and yet none can tell so well as Perceforêt when the first glimpse is breaking; he is uncourteous

thus to disturb our pleasant interview, but it is his wont; we have more reasons than one for seeking our game ere yet the dew is off the grass. It is well your steeds were saved, my Lord, from the fangs of the ravenous wolf; you have far to go and through a toilsome path."

De Montbel took the gentle hint. "Then," said he, "had we best depart at once, to quiet the fears of our friends, many of whom have doubtless been abroad the whole night in the forest seeking us; but, by our Lady! it is lucky they did not find us, and, moreover, it were wisely done to depart before the dawn can aid their search."

"The steeds are close at hand," returned the hunter courteously, "but the way is wet, and the palfrey must be brought hither to the door."

"True, true," said de Montbel quickly; "and I will aid in—"

"Nay, my Lord, there is no need," returned the hunter, smiling; "it is but a step, I—"

"Say no more, I hasten with you," ex-

claimed de Montbel. "Madame will not fear to be alone for a moment," he added, stepping forward with an eagerness which Estelle had seldom witnessed, save when he was bound on some mission for herself.

She saw that Julian started as the faint "No," which she returned in answer to de Montbel's observation, met his ear. He gazed at her intently for an instant, and then, as if fearing to be noticed, directed his attention to the hound.

"Thou canst not go, good Perceforêt," said he, evidently distressed to witness the painful efforts of the poor animal to follow him out ; "thou canst not go ; but fear not, I will return ere long. Alas ! my heart is grieved to desert thee in thy pain."

He closed the door as he spoke. The hound uttered a low short bark of eagerness, and then howled dismally when he no longer beheld his master, while his yearning look towards the door plainly told that his heart at least had fol-

lowed him. Estelle listened to the receding step of the youth with a feeling of satisfaction. Her eye now wandered around the cabin with a far different degree of interest to that which she had before experienced. Here, then, in this dreary spot, was the refuge of the lonely outlaw: here, then, had he dwelt for days, and weeks, and months in solitude, and she did not wonder that he had daily sought the cottage of Jacqueline with such delight. She advanced from the dark nook by the chimney, in the shade of which she had prudently sought concealment while the hunter was present, towards the hearth where old Perceforêt reposed. He growled slightly at first, but she called him softly by his name; and when at length she drew near, he greeted her with every token of joyful recognition. She caressed him fondly for his sake to whom he was so dear, and a tear stood in her eye as she remembered that this had long been his only friend. The hound roused himself to play round her

feet, crying with joy, and she bent low to speak to him with kindness and soothe him in his anguish.

It was at this moment that de Montbel re-entered. He was evidently much surprised to find her thus employed, as he had hurried back, fearing she would feel alarm at being left alone with such a companion. She stammered and knew not what to answer to his reiterated expressions of astonishment; for the faithful animal would not suffer him even to approach, displaying every demonstration of rage at the slightest attempt on his part to move.

“Of a truth, it is passing strange,” said he, “seeing that the hound can be but little used to the sight of ladies! It is worth summoning our host to witness. He will not enter, and I know well it is through dread of seeing the poor brute’s despair when he shall again depart without him, for he has kindly offered to lead us on our way; but I think it would please him to witness this strange—!”

“Nay, nay, there is nothing so very strange; I called him with soothing words, and he came on the instant!” said Estelle in great agitation.

“But he comes not thus to me! I would like the hunter to see how that nothing can resist the influence of Mademoiselle de la Vallée!”

“Ha! but you did not tell him my name?” she exclaimed in a breathless whisper; “you have forgotten; you were surely not wild enough to tell him that my name is La Vallée?”

“Nay, I told him nothing; not that there is cause of fear; he is too courteous even to notice that I am a Royalist. Nay, I will call him—I know it would give him pleasure, to—”

Estelle did not suffer him to conclude his sentence, but hurried to the door on the instant. De Montbel was fain to follow to assist her on her palfrey, and she was right glad that the Duke's kind-hearted caution, as they pro-

ceeded through the intricate path, under the guidance of the hunter, prevented him from indulging in his usual light and merry flow of speech.

Julian walked by the side of the palfrey, while de Montbel, leading his steed, followed also on foot, and, as they thus proceeded in silence, Estelle had full leisure to observe the way they were pursuing. She was well acquainted with the forest, and as they drew nearer to the beaten track, and the path grew more familiar, she well remembered the silent and solitary glen which they had left behind, and how often, when suffered to roam in freedom on her first arrival at Avilly, she had turned away from it with almost superstitious fear, inspired by the dark legends concerning its lonely glades, with which the memory of every peasant in the forest was well stored.

It was not long ere they arrived at the turning in the wood from whence the *grande route* was discernible, and de Montbel, who alone

seemed to remember the perilous situation of the hunter, suddenly stopped, and with many thanks for his kindly service in conducting them thus far, urged his return homeward. The youth turned instantly, and Estelle thought that a sign of intelligence had passed between him and the Duke; nay, she was sure, for she had gazed at Julian intently, and as though she had deemed she should behold him no more. She observed, too, with surprise, that his hand was *first* held out in friendship, and that it grasped that of de Montbel almost convulsively.

"Fare you well, my Lord," said he hurriedly, and in a faltering voice, "it were needless to breathe my thanks: how could I tell all I now feel? but my blessing goes with you, and—and—"

De Montbel had mounted his steed; he bent low, and whispered in the ear of the forester, and so softly, that Estelle could only catch the concluding sentence.

“Fear not, — be not cast down; we shall meet again ere long, and in happier guise too, or, *cadédis*, I am as nothing to King Henry.”

Joy and gratitude beamed in the countenance of Julian, but he spoke not again, for he dared not trust himself. He waved his hand in silence as they passed by, and when Estelle looked back, ere they entered the *carrefour*, he was still standing beneath the tree where they had left him, apparently lost in thought, or, perhaps, merely watching their progress up the narrow pathway.

De Montbel was the first to break silence, although evidently embarrassed. “We have met with a goodly chance,” said he, busying himself in adjusting the caparison of her palfrey—“we have met with a goodly chance in thus finding shelter for the night. Of a truth, I hoped not for such courtesy in a Ligueur; we were sorely pressed, and it might have fared somewhat hard with us.”

He essayed to laugh, but certainly with no

great success, and there was some little anxiety in his manner as he awaited her reply.

"You say truly," she returned, summoning all the resolution of which she was capable; "we might have met with a far less courteous host."

"I fear me yonder Ligueur is in danger and distress; in short, I have reason to believe that he has long been persecuted. Now, it would not be gracious to tell our friends where he has sought refuge; it would not be kind to deprive him of his last chance of—"

"Oh, no, no, no!" interrupted Estelle, vehemently; "think it not, I pray you; it would be a sin, nay, it would be a crime, thus to betray one, who perchance has saved our lives, and sheltered us with kindness so long as we needed his hospitality."

The Duke was evidently well pleased, for she spoke with trembling eagerness, and in sincerity.

"Ah! it is kind, it is generous," he said,

“ thus to feel for the friendless outlaw. He will not believe that such gentle spirits have existence ; but then, alas ! his own has long been sorely crushed and wounded.”

Was it a tear that stood in de Montbel's eye ? Estelle knew not, for her own was dim with sorrow. But no, it could not be ; for he never wept. And yet he turned aside, that she might not view his countenance, and ventured not to speak again, but endeavoured to regain composure.

They rode on in silence and dejection, and day broke around unheeded, in all the treacherous loveliness which so oft succeeds a night of storm and tempest. The thought of the events of that night, the perils undergone, and those escaped from, occupied the mind of each, though perhaps with far different effect. De Montbel traversed the smooth green turf, seemingly willing that his steed should follow his own route, and the gentle palfrey of Estelle followed, equally free and unconstrained.

Not a word was spoken on either side, and great was their delight when the chateau of Avilly, with its hundred turrets and ninety-nine gilded weathercocks, burst upon their sight.

Both were secretly rejoiced at the tumult which assailed them on their arrival. There were, as usual, the loud and voluble greetings, and congratulations, and excuses, and apologies of the domestics; together with sundry well-timed and appropriate faintings and hysterics on the part of the Countess, and the worrying, never-ceasing questioning of Taquine. And then came the more calm and serious inquiries of the Count, all of which were welcome, as they served to divert sadness by taxing their inventions to supply becoming answers. De Montbel was here quite at home, for he was soon aroused. He allayed the fears of those who so eagerly pressed around him; he administered aid and comfort to the Countess, and answered the manifold questions of the Count by

a plausible recital of adventures which had never happened: to the great astonishment of Estelle, describing the peasant's cottage in which they had taken refuge for the night, detailing with the utmost minuteness the interior and exterior of the same; and pretending, with his accustomed vivacity, to imitate the awkward gait and uncouth dialect of the *bûcherons*, their hosts, in order to give an air of authenticity to his narrative. It was believed by all, even by the Count, without suspicion. For once, Nature triumphed, and doubt and mystery were forgotten in the joy that his child was restored in safety to his arms.

CHAPTER X.

"Divine is love, and scorneth worldly pelf,
And can be bought with nothing but with self."

SIR WALTER RALEIGH.

It would be impossible to describe the conflicting emotions which possessed the bosom of Estelle after this event. Sorrow for the past, a consciousness that she could know no happiness while Julian was thus wretched and lonely, occupied her mind by turns. She knew not what his fortune once had been, but it was evident that the King of Navarre took an interest in his fate, and de Montbel—she could scarcely believe it—he, too—for the words which she had overheard proved the fact,—he, too, had appeared willing to assist him.

It was probably then that the desire to aid him also, and to make her father share in these feelings of kindness, first took possession of her mind ; a desire which was doomed to prove so fatal to the object of her solicitude. Now it is a goodly thing for the youthful heart to feel pity for the woes of another, and yet it was an evil hour—ay, a dark and evil hour, when Estelle de la Vallée first sought to relieve the woes of Julian l'Evêque.

She dared not even breathe his name to de Montbel. She now feared more than ever lest the Duke should find that she even so much as knew it, for it would scarcely be deemed natural that she should have been all this while without entertaining a secret conviction that she was not entirely indifferent to the forester. She remembered his unwonted embarrassment when striving to tell what had, in so short a time, rendered the cottage of Jacqueline so dear ; she remembered, also, his glance of love and gratitude when she had rendered him the

Ligueur's hat. She had hitherto cherished these remembrances with joy, but now she could not, even in imagination, add to his load of sorrow ; and from this moment she shrank with horror from the thought, and resolved to believe, nay more, to hope that she was already forgotten, and that he loved her not.

But even this hope, all bitter as it was, did not long exist ; for soon after an event occurred by which it was for ever dispelled.

Time had waned away, and, as the bridal day drew near, it was remarked, not without surprise, that de Montbel grew more and more assiduous in his attentions to the King, scarcely ever leaving his Majesty even to resort to Avilly. This excited some astonishment and some conjecture, and to all, save Estelle herself, appeared a mystery. She only felt, and with delight, that she was now more at liberty and was under less restraint, and sought not to enquire the cause.

The day preceding that which was to make

her de Montbel's bride, the bustle and confusion into which the whole chateau was thrown by the near approach of this event would be a vain task to describe ; but it may, perhaps, be enough to say, that the tiresome punctilio of the Countess, the pompous dictation of the Count, and their ceaseless quarrels on the most paltry points of etiquette, had driven every one possessing sense and liberty to seek refuge anywhere except within its walls.

To escape all this, Estelle herself strolled into the wood, for to her a moment passed amid its quiet shades was happiness. But, unfortunately, Taquine finding herself outdone within doors in gossip and importance, had wisely made a retreat, and followed her, to wonder why de Montbel was absent, and why he had of late hovered so much about the King, and to express astonishment at his Majesty's sudden change of resolution in following the chase, when he had protested that he would never again hunt at Chantilly, and, moreover,

to marvel greatly why this fact had not been made public, and why it had been kept secret; for even she would not have known it, had she not closely questioned one of the *veneurs* whom she had met by accident, and chancing to ask him whither he was going, and he appearing unwilling to tell, she had resolved to find out, not that she cared to know, but that it was always most judicious to search out the truth in all things. By dint of bribery she had succeeded, and he had revealed to her, under the promise of the strictest secrecy, that it was the King's intent to hunt with the King of Navarre, and was in all haste to join the *meute*, but that, were it known that he had told, he should gain sore disgrace, M. de Montbel being anxious that it should not reach the ears of the Count de la Vallée. Now was it not strange, was it not odd?—but really the King had given way to so many strange whims since he had grown intimate with Henry de Bourbon, that nothing he could now do would excite marvel among those who knew him

All this information was followed by strict injunctions to silence, and endless assurances that nothing but the great love which she bore her own dear Estelle could have ever made her break the promise she had so solemnly given not to divulge the secret to any one. But the injunction seemed useless; the secret was little likely to be revealed by her companion, who had given no ear to what she had been saying, being lost in contemplation of the romantic scenery around her.

It was one of those beautiful farewell days of spring, that short delicious interval ere yet the breeze has lost its cool refreshing power, or the sun's rays have gained all their summer fierceness. Estelle had chosen an unfrequented path, lured by the tranquillity which it seemed to promise; every thing slumbered in the quiet noon; the very birds were hushed amid the boughs, and seemed to invite to silence and repose. A branch of the calm, the peaceful Nonette stole through the overhanging wood with gentle and

soothing murmur; its sloping bank literally covered with flowers of all hues, and a superb white thorn, which grew on the very edge of the stream, bending forward with pliant grace, cast a broad shadow over its silvery waters. It was perhaps the last in the forest, for the spring was fast fading away, and the upper branches even of this had been long ago deprived of their perfume, but the thick carpet of blossoms which lay driven against the verdant bank, told how beautiful they had once been; while the lower boughs, sheltered by their cool and shady situation, stretching over the little river, and reflected in its shining surface, looked a moving mass of pure unsullied snow.

Perhaps it was that the sight of the hawthorn brought to mind Julian l'Evêque; but Estelle suddenly stopped as it caught her eye, as if in admiration of its wonderful beauty. But scarcely did she gaze an instant ere that deep blue eye was suffused with tears as she thought on his melancholy lot, and she sank

down on the greensward by the side of the stream, seemingly to enjoy the cool retirement of the spot, while in reality overcome by grief to find how much of love yet lurked in her bosom for this unknown stranger, even while on the very eve of swearing eternal faith to one all rich, and good, and powerful as was de Montbel.

In nervous agitation she plucked the flowers which grew in rich luxuriance on the sloping bank, and heedless of the action flung them into her lap. Taquine had seated herself by her side ; the good old lady loved Estelle more than any other living thing—or rather with more justice it might be said, she loved indeed none other ; she had watched her every motion with mingled pride and tenderness, and she could not help grieving to see her favourite thus sad. But it was not in her power to remain silent for any length of time ; she was not long at a loss for a subject [of conversation ; suddenly snatching the flowers from the unresisting hand of Estelle, she exclaimed gaily,

“Thou hast done aright, dear Estelle; these flowers were doubtless gathered for de Montbel; let us twine them into a garland. It is his bridal eve, it is but meet thou shouldest present him with some token, and what is more sweet, more beautiful than flowers?”

She threw the variegated blossoms on the grass beside her, and proceeded with her usual fluency of speech, while Estelle yet remained absorbed in her reverie, and as Taquine sorted the flowers, her tongue all the while busily kept pace with her fingers.

“Thou canst not imagine, dearest, how much I was surprised—Ah! here is the violet, the very thing for de Montbel—How much I was surprised to find that the King would hunt to-day—The blue bell, too, it will please the Duke; he said its hue was like ‘thine eye—But, to speak truth, his Majesty has appeared very strange ever since the day that we went on the fowling party, although he did not go himself—But stay, what lovely primroses! see how well the colours blend,—the pale yellow

and the modest purple; but we sorely need something white, seeing that it is for a bridal gift. Lo, you! look but at yonder hawthorn, it is temptation; arouse thee, dearest, see if thou canst reach it; thou hast had such fair success, it would verily be sin in me to aid thee."

The latter observation was made in pure good-nature to arouse Estelle from the silence or sadness—for with Taquine the words were synonymous—which had overtaken her. The request, however, produced the intended effect, for Estelle was rejoiced to escape from the talkative old lady, who, innocent as the newborn babe in matters of this nature, never dreamt of guile, and, as the gentle maiden descended to the thicket at the water's-edge, she inwardly blessed her for her ready compliance with her wishes.

Estelle approached the hawthorn with light step, and stooped low to gather the rich flowers as they hung drooping over the stream;

but she paused, while yet the branch was trembling in her hand, and thought of the hunter. He had told her that this flower was his badge, that it had been his hope in peace, his reliance in the raging battle, and she felt that the act was unkind thus to bestow them on another : but, notwithstanding, she plucked them ; they were in her hand, when suddenly that strain of wild unearthly sweetness,—that strain which she now so well remembered,—the challenge of the d'Espignacs,—the challenge that Julian himself had breathed, as if to reproach her with her treachery,—rose from a distance, floating even above the tall pines of the forest, and rang in her ears !

She started with surprise, and looked around in dismay, while the flowers fell unheeded to the ground ; but she listened, and all was silent ! and then she would not believe that she had heard that sound. She placed both her hands upon her heart to feel how it was beating, and smiled to think that fancy could

have thus deceived her. She again drew a bough towards her, and robbed it of its snowy blossoms. It flew back to its lowly station over the silvery water, and then again did that sound, like a solemn warning, arise amid the calm stillness of the woods! It was the same, the very same; this time she could not be deceived, and was about to hurry from the spot, when suddenly a loud shriek burst from the lips of Taquine, and arrested the movement. She turned and gazed upward; Taquine was on her knees, and the wild and savage boar, the object of that day's chase, was seen rushing in fury from amid the bushes behind. The colour forsook her cheek as the infuriated animal sprang down the bank towards the river. His back was bristling with rage, his eye gleamed in fury, and the white foam, which fell in flakes from his extended jaws, betokened that he was hunted almost into madness. An exclamation of horror escaped from the lips of Taquine; she shrieked for

aid—she called to Estelle—she implored her to fly on the instant ! but, alas ! Estelle moved not, seemingly deprived of all power of motion, she stood with clasped hands gazing upward at the terrified *gouvernante*, fully as helpless and terrified as herself.

The fierce animal still kept on his way, attracted by the cool shining water, and panting but to slake the raging thirst by which he was consumed, and then perhaps he would take another course. Such was their hope ; but it was transient, and vanished quickly, for suddenly the full cry of the royal hunt was heard—the fierce baying of the hounds—the hoarse cheering of the *piqueurs* as they shouted *à cor à cri !* rent the air as they turned a corner of the wood, and once more got in full pursuit of their chase. The boar suddenly paused and listened, and, turning one fierce glance towards the quarter whence the sounds proceeded, he darted instantly to covert, and sprang with the speed of lightning towards the

thicket where stood in silent terror Estelle de la Vallée ! She deemed not that she could escape the impending danger ; she closed her eyes, and, clasping the slender stem of the hawthorn, shrank behind its fragile branches, as though they could afford her protection. All hope seemed, indeed, at an end ; another instant and the boar must inevitably be at her side : she gave herself up for lost, when just at this moment a violent stir was heard amid the bushes behind the hawthorn ; she was conscious that some one rushed from among them ; a fierce yell of agony burst from the terrific animal, and ere she could well remember what had passed, she sank into the arms of him whom she had thought to have beheld no more—the arms of Julian l'Evêque.

His dark eye melted with tenderness as he gazed on the lovely burthen that reclined upon his arm. The wind played among her golden ringlets and blew them over his cheek, and as he bent over her in deep emotion, the snowy plumes of his beaver fanned her brow ! The

moment was to him one of intense delight, and he would have had it last for ever.

But Estelle was soon aroused to a sense of their situation. She was calm and self-possessed, for she deemed that his flushed cheek and sparkling eye were occasioned by the ardour of the chase alone. Her first thought was of Taquine. She looked upward to where she had stood ; she was no longer there, and she hastened to profit by her absence.

“ Fly ! ” said she, hastily turning to Julian ; “ think how great must be the danger. You saved me from death, and yet I dare not stop to breathe my thanks ! But there is no time to waste on idle ceremony ; there is scarcely enough for you to retreat, if you do not make all haste to depart.”

But Julian answered not, nor suffered her to move. He trembled violently. Estelle was amazed : she gazed upon his face with curiosity ; but when his glance met hers, she blushed deeply and turned aside.

He was attired in the bright green hunting-

suit which he had always worn, but in addition a richly embroidered mantle was thrown across his shoulder. His rifle was slung as usual at his back, but a glittering broad-sword lay at his feet bathed in gore, and told why the boar had so suddenly turned his course, and the empty scabbard hung by his side.

But the sound of the royal hunt again burst from the wood yet nearer than before. The hunter started; but Estelle shrank as each note of the bugle swelled upon her ear. She again spoke, though this time it was in a whisper.

“Depart, I now entreat you, M. l’Evêque ! the King’s hounds are scouring the woods, and the King’s friends are following the chase. Hark ! that sound again ! Begone ! Seek the thicket whence you came in kindness to rescue me !”

To her astonishment, nay, to her terror, Julian yet remained motionless, grasping her hand with obstinate energy. It was evident

that he essayed to speak, for he gasped convulsively, while his pallid lips quivered with emotion.

“No, no,” he exclaimed at length, summoning resolution when the sound of the bugle again broke the stillness, “I cannot fly, Mademoiselle, until the purpose which has brought me hither be accomplished—until I know my fate, whatever it be! Day and night have I wandered in the forest thinking to trace your steps, but you have not come of late as once you were wont; and when I saw you from the height, I blew my bugle to arrest your attention,—I hastened to your side. Much hath chanced since I last beheld you—that day of wild delight in the garden of the *vachère’s* cottage—that last farewell—nay, blame me not, but since that hour I have known no peace—it has made me turn traitor even to myself—they have lured me from my revenge—they have beguiled me with fair hopes, and I, who knew they have ever spoken false, trusted, and

believed again, and this for the love of Estelle de la Vallée !”

He had gradually grown more and more vehement as he proceeded, until he had forgotten all restraint, all etiquette, and his trembling soul hung upon his lips in every soft melting word they breathed.

Estelle had listened as if in a dream, and when he ceased speaking and she was awakened, it was to find the high-souled, proud, and scornful Julian, who would not have bowed, no, not to the world's conqueror, now kneeling in humble supplication at her feet.

She could not speak ; she felt as though she should have fainted with the effort ; but all trace of colour had vanished from her cheek, and despair was in her look, as ever and anon the sounds indicating the approach of the chase met her ear.

“ Nay, you will not distress me thus,” said Julian, while his dark eyes shone with intense

lustre; "I know well this is no time for wooing; but, alas! I am of few words, and perchance possess the rough speech of one who has long been accustomed to the solitary woods; yet hear me for a moment. I spoke not of love—I looked not even one glance that could betray how my heart was aching while I was outlawed and friendless; but my fate has changed! To-morrow, perchance to-night, I shall depart hence on a mission of peace, although it may prove one of peril—say that this hand shall not be bestowed on another before I return: say but that I may hope, even though it be with a thousand others: I care not—I fear no rival—I mind not how dearly the prize be bought, so that I have but the least glimmering of hope that it may be mine."

He paused, but Estelle spoke not, and he joyously exclaimed:—

"Yes, you will! you will! your silence gives token. Jacqueline has spoken truth: You

will not disdain my suit, and—and I may not hope in vain !”

A long blast of the bugle just then arose from the forest, so near at hand that the hunter suddenly started upon his feet ; it was evidently meant for a merry summons, but the tones were so languid and unsteady that they seemed almost melancholy.

But when they had died away he continued—

“ I come not now as the poor and homeless wanderer—I am not what I seem—my name is not—nay, I pray you turn not aside—my name is—one that you—it is—it is—”

He was interrupted : a deadly shriek, almost unearthly, burst from the agitated girl. She had not heard his speech : she appeared to have lost all presence of mind, and her voice was hoarse, nay, almost harsh and grating, as she frantically exclaimed,

“ You are wild to linger here ; the King himself is now in sight. The King, list you, who would view a Ligueur with the same feeling as the fierce animal he has been pur-

suing. Nothing, nothing could now avail, were he once to set his eye upon your drooping plume."

Julian turned; a terrific glance shot from beneath his dark eyelashes as he looked up and beheld King Henry himself, at some little distance, on the top of the bank, mounted on his milk-white steed, and shading his face with both his hands, to shield his complexion from the rays of the sun, as he gazed downward towards the thicket. The current of his thoughts seemed for the moment turned into another channel.

"It is, indeed, Henry himself," he murmured, as his hand instinctively grappled the powder-horn which hung at his belt; "he stands alone too, and not surrounded, as is his wont. Small is the danger, therefore, of mistaking the innocent for the guilty. What hinders me now, I pray from taking my just revenge? It is verily temptation; and—but for my promise, would even be too strong for resistance."

But Estelle suffered him not thus to indulge

his thoughts undisturbed : she had watched every motion of the King with intense anxiety ; she saw him stroke his steed, and carefully adjust the rich caparison ; she saw him replace his snowy glove, and deliberately thrust each finger into its proper place ; and now he was in the act of drawing the silken rein through his hand, in order to hold up his steed as he advanced down the steep bank towards the river.

“ Oh God ! why tarry you thus ? ” she exclaimed, “ ere another instant be past, the hunters will have reached the coppice, and you will be lost ! ”

“ But I depart not thus, Estelle de la Vallée ; say but the one word — say but once that I may not hope in vain.”

“ Nay, nay, detain me not,” shrieked Estelle, as the tramp of other steeds was now heard. “ Have pity on me, Julian ! Julian, have pity on me, and seek your own safety without delay.”

"I go not hence, so help me Heaven!" he exclaimed, perhaps encouraged by her visible emotion, and the tender tone in which she had spoken,—“I stir not from this spot, till you have given me hope; it is for this alone that I have forsworn all my dreams of vengeance: sooner would I yield to certain death; sooner would I be murdered where I stand, than depart hence as I came. Let them take my life; it is now, in truth, of little worth, since—”

“Cavalier, your senses have forsaken you!” cried Estelle, wrenching her hand from his grasp by a sudden effort, and stepping before him, to screen him from the sight of those on the bank above.

“Would to Heaven it were true!” returned the young man, gloomily; “then might I deem I had been deceived;—but no, you are like the rest. Jacqueline has judged falsely, she thought —”

“Nay, think it not, Julian—I pray you, think it not,” said Estelle, with far more of

terror at his increasing danger, than of anger, at his haughty manner. "Think not ill of my refusal, but in truth I cannot — dare not grant what you have asked! My father—my father—"

"True, true, I had forgotten; then, by the God of Heaven, I stir not hence! Now then is the time to signalize my vengeance; Count Hubert was right, who shall presume to frustrate his prophecy?" With the quickness of the lightning's flash he unslung the rifle at his back, seemingly resolved to meet his fate; a scarlet flush overspread his face; all the wild fierceness, the reckless desperation which had once distinguished him again returned. "Farewell; sweet dreams of happiness!" he continued, in that sarcastic tone which she had been used to dread, loading the piece and thrusting down the ramrod; "in truth, I should rejoice that ye were but of such short duration, or that even I ere long shall be lulled into forgetfulness. Farewell the hopes with which they would beguile me! I reject them all, and turn again to my revenge! See,

it is a right royal hunt—how they emerge in numbers from the covert of the woods! Ha! the struggle will be deadly! the greensward will have changed its colour ere our strife be over! Seek safety, maiden: farewell, farewell! and may your life be long and merry with your father and his friends.”

But Estelle was distracted, she gazed upward to the advancing party, and then upon the hunter, who thus remained firm and resolute. She grew bewildered, and knew not where she stood; she advanced towards the youth, and laying her hand upon his arm, gently uttered his name.

“Julian l’Evêque, will you not fly when I thus implore you?”

The words had some effect, for his countenance relaxed from its stern expression as he gazed on her pallid face—still he spoke not. The huntsmen were now yet closer to the spot; she clasped her hands; there was no alternative.

“Nay, then,” she exclaimed in a tone of the

bitterest anguish, "I will take the vow if you will but enter the thicket; I will do any thing so that you will but hasten to—Nay, nay! tarry not; see, they come—they come. Praise be to Heaven! the King is not a careless rider, and the others dare not gain upon his steps. But why—why stand you thus? Did I not say that I would take the vow—I do—I do; so help me Heaven, Julian l'Eveque, I will love none but you!"

The youth seemed at once to lose all thought of danger in that treacherous moment of happiness.

"Fear not for me, Heaven has saved me now!" he exclaimed exultingly. "Was it indeed Estelle de la Vallée who spoke those words? Is it true, for I can scarce—"

"Yes—yes, it was I—it was I!" interrupted Estelle in agony at his delay. "But see, it was useless, for they come now close at hand—Alas! you would not listen to my voice."

Julian himself appeared now to feel the

necessity of urging his flight, although loth to tear himself from the spot. In spite of his danger he dropped on one knee and imprinted a fervent kiss upon the maiden's hand. Oh what a flow of gratitude and love did he now experience ! all the tenderness, the kindly feelings, which had so long been locked within his bosom, seemed at once to gush forth, and as he knelt at her feet he sobbed aloud.

He snatched up the sword that lay upon the grass ; beside it was the bunch of hawthorn which Estelle had gathered.

" Ha !" he exclaimed, as it caught his eye, " it was kindly meant—by Heaven it is a goodly omen !—Farewell—farewell until we meet again—farewell, I bear it with me as a token."

He withdrew that instant amid the dark leaves of the thicket, and was lost to sight ; Estelle de la Vallée gazed upon his track with the fixed gaze of despair. She inwardly returned her thanks to Heaven for his deliverance ;

she rejoiced that he had escaped, and knew not that his doom was already sealed.

She was aroused by a slight impatient tap upon her arm. It was from the fan of portentous length which hung suspended from the wrist of Taquine. Estelle knew not how long she had been standing thus; she had not heard her approach, and perceived with dismay that curiosity was depicted in her countenance. But Taquine suffered her not to speculate long; the words were already on her lips. She had ever scorned the vulgar art of fishing, but always came at once straight and steadily to the point, which she now did by the short and pithy question,—

“Who is that man in green?”

Estelle grew pale, hemmed and hesitated, and pretended not to comprehend her meaning; but Taquine was not so easy to pacify; she again gave her the same short impatient tap with her fan, and again repeated precisely the same question,—“Who is that man in green?”

The words seemed to puzzle Estelle as much as though they had been Greek or Hebrew. She was resolved to give no answer, and it was no small relief, just as her indefatigable tormentor was on the point of again assailing her, to find herself suddenly surrounded by the whole train of huntsmen.

There were, of course, the due complement of serious condolences at the terror she must have suffered, and of hearty congratulations at her happy escape from so much danger ; to all of which it was remarked that she replied with more earnestness and spirit than she had of late betrayed, so great was her joy to be rid of the officious importunity of Taquine. It proved, however, that the latter, in the extremity of her distress, had fled with kind-hearted zeal to the brow of the hill to meet the cavaliers, and had endeavoured, by every means in her power, to hasten their approach. De Montbel's rapture at finding Estelle safe and unharmed was beyond all expression ; and the King, too, was

overjoyed, for, when left to follow its own dictates, his heart was tender almost to a fault.

They had taken the boar when he had toiled to the top of the hill, and they now began to marvel who had given him the wound which they had observed before that "*les chiens l'avoient coiffé.*" It was not a bullet, it was not an arrow, it was plainly a deep sword-thrust; and then they wondered by whose hand it had been bestowed. But the King of Navarre and the Duke de Montbel, who were both anxious that nothing should transpire to disturb the mind of the King, hastily hushed all controversy upon the subject; and, by their means, it was quickly converted into a merry dispute concerning the most agreeable method of conveying the ladies to the chateau.

Estelle was of course courteously assigned to de Montbel, while Taquine remained a cause of mirthful quarrel to the two monarchs, each contending for the honour of bearing her upon his horse's crupper. The dispute became so obsti-

nate, that de Montbel at last gallantly proposed to refer it to the lady herself. She, however, unawed by distinctions, and not in possession of that tact and delicacy which enables a person to distinguish between one who is in power and one who is to be, instantly declared in favour of him who could bear her away most quickly. This resolve being known, the King instantly ordered a page to assist her in mounting, while the King of Navarre sprang off his horse in a moment, and threw her into the saddle in the twinkling of an eye, amid the uncontrolled laughter of the bystanders, in which the King good-naturedly joined, although railed at by the successful candidate for his tardiness.

But Henry de Valois amply revenged himself for this, by declaring that de Bourbon had performed the feat too neatly not to induce a suspicion that he had been often similarly engaged. This remark caused the courtiers to wink knowingly at each other, which the youthful hero perceiving, he blushed

deep as scarlet, declaring it a poor and pitiful conceit, a foul invention gendered in the brain of spite—a base and odious calumny, framed in malice ; and then rode off, laughing heartily all the while at the good success of this random hit.

But Taquine was quite unawed by all this ; nothing daunted, she called to Estelle as she passed rapidly by, “ They are fools to marvel thus who wounded the wild boar ; depend upon it, dearest, it was the man in green.”

CHAPTER XI.

“ Quelle main a porté cette atteinte funeste ?
Le monde sait sa mort—la tombe sait le reste ! ”

DELILLE.

THE happy morning dawned at length — happy at least to all but her on whose bridal it was destined to shine. Grief filled the bosom of Estelle de la Vallée ; she trembled to think of her rash vow to Julian l'Evêque. It seemed, indeed, as though she were for ever destined to betray. But she had saved his life, and she rejoiced within herself, and said, “ It is well, since he would else have died even as he stood before my eyes. He is gone ere this on his far mission, and I shall away to Gascony and behold him no more.”

Could pride and pomp have satisfied her heart on that day, she would assuredly have been most happy. The King and all the Court were to grace her nuptials with their presence, and they arrived at Avilly betimes in the morning, for it cannot be imagined that de Montbel would suffer them to know a moment's rest. He was, in truth, wild with joy. This was a matter of course, and excited no astonishment, neither did the buoyant spirits of Henry de Navarre, for he was always thus ; but added to these, the King himself partook of the same wild glee, which was in some degree a cause of marvel to the courtiers, for, although ever bent on amusement, the mirth of the monarch in general was found to partake of his character, and was calm and indolent. But now he talked and laughed, and flew here and there wild and heedless as any, and with a confidence, too, so different to the trembling caution which he had of late betrayed, that it attracted the notice of all. When, however, he an-

nounced his intention even of accompanying the procession to the solitary Chapel in the wood, hands and eyes were raised, and all in wonder at this sudden return of courage. It was well known how much he loved de Montbel, but such a sacrifice was more than could have been anticipated, and gave reason to believe that he had other cause of mirth than the mere sight of his young friend's happiness.

The Count de la Vallée, it must be confessed, seemed alone not to participate in the universal joy. A dark cloud was upon his brow, which of all ought to have worn the most gladness. Some few could tell that it was occasioned by fear and vexation on learning that the King had joined the hunt on the day before, but with the many it passed for grief at parting with his only child, and was overlooked accordingly. The Countess, however, was in her element. She found perfect delight amid the bowing, smirking, forms, precedents, and genealogy which were considered as her peculiar

portion of the day's ceremony. She rejoiced with aristocratic pride in her daughter's high fortune; she rejoiced with all a mother's love in that daughter's transcendent beauty, nor dreamed that the flush which mantled in her cheek, and the bright unusual sparkling of her eye, were transient and treacherous.

Many were the prayers breathed for the happiness of de Montbel and his bride, as the procession moved towards the Chapel. The King himself claimed the honour of leading Estelle; and the Countess de la Vallée, who was *très forte sur les dates*, took care to remind all present, that never since the marriage of the Duke de Joyeuse with Mademoiselle de Vaudemont, the Queen's sister, had he deigned such condescension to any.

Plumes and brocade, gold and precious stones met the eye at every turn, and yet few were the glances that were turned aside from Estelle. In the pure simplicity of her bridal attire she far outshone the richly decorated groups by whom she was surrounded.

So far all was hilarity and boisterous merriment ; and the day might have passed off thus, had not an event occurred to check this happiness, which, however shuddered at as an evil omen by all, yet could the bride alone comprehend to the full extent its meaning.

De Montbel's gallantry had suggested, as a fit tribute to the youthful innocence of Estelle, that some offering, as of love, should mingle with all the pomp and pageantry which were of custom ; and groups of village maidens, clad in spotless white, met her at the Chapel-door, scattering flowers on her path, even to the very altar ; while one, the fairest amongst them, then advanced, and placing a blooming crown upon the forehead of the bride, again withdrew amid her companions. This conceit excited great admiration ; it displayed such tender feeling, such delicate attention on the part of the bridegroom, that many of those ladies to whom a sorrowful countenance was most becoming, were actually seen to shed tears, looking all

the time through their muslin kerchiefs to see if the cavaliers opposite were observing them. As the ceremony proceeded, however, much of this untimely levity was checked. The voice of old Father Paul was deep and solemn as he pronounced the benediction, for he loved Estelle,—he rejoiced in her happiness, and prayed that it might continue for ever. Every other sound was hushed; every head was bent low as he spoke the words so fervently, and with such emphasis, that they left a deep impression upon every heart. It was some few moments ere the creaking of chairs and the rustling of silks announced that the company had arisen; but then the noisy laughter, the eager congratulations, and the light tripping of fairy feet towards the bride, made ample amends for that momentary silence.

The Count de la Vallée now approached on the one hand, all stateliness and reserve; the Countess de la Vallée approached on the other, all aristocratic condescension and matronly dignity. They kissed Estelle on either

cheek, and together they removed the maidenly chaplet of flowers from her brow, while de Montbel pressed forward, and taking the ducal coronet from the altar, placed it there instead. This was evidently to him the proudest moment of his life, and he gazed at her with a pride and fondness which he cared not to conceal. The coronet was a fortune in itself, blazing with jewels, and proved in no small degree the bridegroom's generosity. The ladies all approached with many exclamations at its magnificence; they could not, of course, be satisfied with a mere view, they must touch and examine it, uttering divers small expressions of wonder at so much splendour and so much sense, so much liberality and so much love. When the dowagers, and those initiated in the subject of jewels and etiquette had thus looked their fill, the younger ladies were allowed to approach, but their lisping admiration was suddenly interrupted by the Count de la Vallée.

"Who wrought this chaplet?" inquired he

in a voice bursting with passion, as he held aloft the snow-white wreath which he had taken from his daughter's head.

All turned. It was a chaplet of the white thorn, and none were at a loss to know the cause of the Count's ungoverned anger. Even de Montbel was displeased; he had ordered white roses: the Father was summoned,—the Father could not unravel the mystery. But it was at length explained by the little damsel who had borne it, and who, amid sobbing, crying, and all the demonstrations of childish grief, confessed that the crown of roses which she had received from Father Paul had been destroyed. “Nanette had crushed it. Nanette was always so rude in play,—and—and she had taken the other.”

“Whence, thou hapless maiden?”

“Nay, nay, Monseigneur, it was fair and fresh! I thought it was all the same! I—I—”

“But who gave it to thee, I say?”

“No one gave it to me; in truth, I stole it,

and in haste, from the tomb of the Countess Mélanie !”

A slight exclamation of horror ran through the assembly; the King in agitation sought for his smelling-bottle, while the Countess de la Vallée, with unholy forgetfulness, sank against the altar, and exclaimed,

“ Ah ! it is evil chance ! The wreath of death ! and from the tomb of a d’Espignac !”

But indignation alone had place in the bosom of the Count. He gazed around. Near him stood his daughter ; the many-coloured light from the painted casement streamed in a ray of glory round her brow, reflected in the flashing jewels of the ducal coronet : beside her stood the Duke de Montbel her husband ; and near the King of France, to whom de Montbel was as dear as life. Count Adhémar had spoken right ; *his* banner—the banner of *his* house was floating above, even where crumbled the bones of “ Hubert the Hunter and Valmont the Warrior !” Pride swelled in every

vein ; his heart, and mind, and soul, were all puffed up with pride ; and in that hour he forgot the gentler feelings of his nature—he forgot that gratitude may find place within the rudest breast, and that there is no crime in loving those who are gone down into the grave, but rather, it is the only human love which seeks no recompense and hopes for no return.

“ And who has dared to deck with flowers the tomb of the Countess Mélanie ?” he exclaimed, darting a furious look towards the group of frightened peasants which lined the furthest corner of the Chapel : “ The time is gone to show respect to those of her name ; and see you, slaves, the hawthorn now must lie beneath my feet !”

He flung the garland on the floor, and the next moment, but for its green leaves, it could not have been discerned beneath his white *escarpins*. No one spoke : it was felt a sacrilege thus to treat what was in fact an offering to the dead ; but the silence was at length broken by de Montbel’s voice.

“Unbar yonder casement! Estelle is fainting!” he exclaimed in hurried tones. “Sir Count, ye are cruel thus to disturb our bridal with your paltry animosities! Quick, stand not thus gazing! nay, nay, quick, I pray you, open yonder door, if the window be too high to reach!”

He pointed to the door of the oratory. It was a heavy door and creaked mournfully as it swung back upon its hinges. The noise, or perhaps the cool draft of air, caused Estelle to uncloset her eyes. By chance her gaze turned towards the oratory, even through the opening door, and as if overcome by sudden horror, a wild and trembling shriek, which vibrated through the Gothic arches of the chapel, escaped her lips, and had not de Montbel at that moment stepped forward to receive her in his arms, she would have sunk without sense or motion on the marble pavement.

They crowded round, they fanned her brow, and drew aside her bridal veil; all were eager to

assist in restoring her to consciousness. The Count alone stood silent and motionless, as though he had not heard that dismal shriek. He, who but the moment before had borne the most haughty look of all present, now stood nigh trembling, the fire of his eye all quenched, and his cheek blanched with terror. He, too, had beheld the vision in the oratory ; he, too, had beheld that countenance which nothing but death could ever efface from his remembrance. His eye was fascinated, and ere it was withdrawn, the door was closed in haste, and nothing more was to be seen.

It was not till then that he moved from where he stood ; he laid his hand upon his rapier, ay, even at the very altar.

“ Close the Chapel door !” he exclaimed ; “ keep watch that no one depart hence ! There are traitors close at hand, your Majesty, even in yonder oratory !”

“ What ails you, Sir Count ?” suddenly exclaimed the King, who in reality was just then kneeling on one knee by the side of Estelle,

kindly applying the smelling-bottle, which he had sought for himself, to her use, "we are tending on your daughter. Praise be to Heaven! she breathes once more; small thanks to you for your kindly aid."

But the Count was occupied with the one idea alone. He drew near to his Majesty, fully convinced that a single word from his lips could chase all this indifference. He whispered in his ear—

"So please your Majesty, even my anxiety for my sweet Estelle has faded in terror for your royal safety."

"Ha!" exclaimed the King, turning on the instant, "what is it?—what has chanced now? Are we in truth never to be left in peace?"

"This it is, your Majesty, your greatest enemy and mine now lurks within these very walls! Nay, betray not too great—I—Adhémar d'Espignac stands nigh, even beside the Virgin's altar in the oratory!"

The King looked for a moment in La Val-

lée's face. He deigned no answer ; but suddenly rising to his feet, left Estelle, who was now fast recovering, and beckoned to de Montbel.

“ What thinkest thou ? ” said he to the Duke, while La Vallée could scarcely believe the evidence of his sight in thus witnessing the total unconcern with which he spoke : “ What thinkest thou ? La Vallée has visions more wild, in sooth, than those of a love-sick maiden ; he has seen Adh  mar d’Espignac standing in the oratory ! ”

He laughed in derision ; but de Montbel joined not in his mirth. His look was stern, for he felt aggrieved at having the day’s happiness thus marred ; and without speaking he advanced towards the door, and pushing it open, entered on the instant. Both Henry de Valois and the Count de la Vall  e pressed eagerly forward, the one in curiosity, the other in fear. They stood at the entrance and looked around, but Father Paul alone was there

kneeling at the altar. Henry turned upon his heel, and exclaimed in a sneering tone—

“Methinks the youth is somewhat changed, La Vallée, since thou last beheldest him!”

The Count could not help imagining that there was something cold and distant in the manner of the King towards him, and this conviction caused him to feel somewhat uneasy. He now, at length, turned towards Estelle; but it was to hide his own agitation. She had recovered, and it was observed that she had raised herself by an extraordinary effort when de Montbel first opened the door of the oratory, and that when he returned thence she grew gradually more composed. She was herself the first to beg leave to retire to breathe her orisons and pay her tribute to the Holy Virgin, for she perceived that the company were in haste to depart, and she wished not to prolong their stay.

Her heart beat somewhat thick as she entered the little oratory. A glance sufficed to

show that no one save the Father was within. She scrutinised closely every recess and corner, and began finally to doubt if she had not been misled by her own imagination; but as she drew near to the altar, she thought the Father strangely altered since she last beheld him. He was agitated, and there was a flutter and anxiety about his manner which she had not before observed. Her prayers were few and short, for her thoughts wandered, and she felt not calm enough to pray. When she arose, she took out her purse and placed it in the Friar's hands; it was well stored for the purpose, and more than pleased with its weight, he chinked it merrily.

“Many thanks, sweet daughter,” said he, “the offering will please our heavenly Mother; she will smile on thee, and grant thee many happy days. Thy generous gift cometh at the right season, and when she standeth in the greatest need of it. See, Lady, the glory is somewhat departed from her, and my intent to

restore it has been hitherto baffled for lack of means. But our Lady herself has surely arisen to aid me this morn: see you the rich gift which has fallen to my share?"

Estelle looked, but without interest, for she perceived that the Father was scarcely less agitated than herself, and that even while he was speaking his eye wandered with restless expression around. She turned a glance to where his finger pointed beneath the image of the Virgin, where the votive offerings were usually laid; and all her doubts and uneasiness returned, when she there beheld the ring which she had seen in the possession of the King of Navarre: that signet-ring of the sparkling emerald, on which the bounding stag was so beautifully graven.

Surprise kept her silent, but Father Paul continued; for it seemed as though he himself talked but to regain composure,

"Would it were a sapphire!" said he; "thy bounty, daughter, would have furnished even

another. Thy blue and sparkling eyes would have well beseeemed her sweet and gracious countenance."

But Estelle was wholly heedless of the subject which was of the most importance to Father Paul.

"And who was the pious Christian that made this noble offering to our heavenly Mother?" said she, faintly.

"Ah! maiden, to that there belongs a mystery," returned the Friar; "it was, in fact, a stranger, who is the more to be commended, seeing that—"

"Ha! then it was not the King of Navarre?" exclaimed Estelle, with a secret unaccountable dread at hearing the truth which she could not have explained even to herself, seeing she had no reason to suppose that it had belonged to any other.

"The King of Navarre! Nay, nay, the light of truth has not as yet dawned upon his mind. The generous giver of yonder jewel—breathe it

to none, I pray thee—was a young Ligneur ; but keep it secret :—I—I have been in sore alarm—in short, I am not yet recovered—for—he stood here, on this very spot, a few moments ago. Think of his danger ! the King and the Court only on the other side of yonder door !”

“ And Father ! but did he escape ! Nay, keep me not in suspense. Art thou sure he is in safety ?”

“ Hush ! be not heard of those in the Chapel ; I will tell thee—the time will be of service to the youth, and enable him to get deeper amid the woods. Betray me not, but he has oftentimes before been here, sometimes at vespers, sometimes at early matins. I took no heed of his presence, for it would ill beseem my holy office to close the Chapel door on any one.”

“ But his name ! his name ! told he his name ?”

“ Nay, he told me not, and I sought not to know, for, daughter, I feared that he dared

not tell his name at Avilly ; but I rejoice now, his danger is at an end. He came this morn to kneel in the Chapel : I was here betimes, for I was concerned about thy bridal ; and he came to say farewell, and to beg my prayers, for he was about to depart. And he seemed wellnigh overcome by secret joy ; and I was well pleased to see the youth thus happy ; for I had never seen him save in sadness. And he said he should like to make an offering to our Lady of the Forest, who had of late vouchsafed him many a blessing ; and he asked me what would be most acceptable to insure her blessing and her aid in his undertaking. Now, I had our Lady's glory at heart : I saw yonder gem upon his finger, and bethinking me of the false stones at her girdle, straightway bade him surrender what he valued most."

" ' Nay, Father, I am but as thou seest,' he returned mildly.

" ' But surely thou hast some token, my son,

to which thou dost attach more value than to aught beside,' said I.

" ' Ay, true,' returned he thoughtfully, and I held out my hand fully expecting the ring, when—what thinkest thou he drew forth from his bosom ? ay, as carefully preserved as though it had been gold or precious stones ; why—ha ! ha ! ha !—a love-token, maiden.'

And then the Friar laughed, as Friars and poor ones only can laugh, a peal that echoed to the roof, and induced those who were impatiently waiting without to hope that Estelle was about to appear.

But Estelle paid no heed to their repeated summons. She inquired in a trembling tone of what the gift consisted.

" Alas ! it was little worth," said Father Paul, " sadly different to the rich gifts which the generosity of the Duke de Montbel has—"

" Nay, I ask not that, tell me quickly what it was."

" A purse of sky-blue silk—nay, but verily

resembling this as strongly as two drops of water,—ay! when I look, it resembled this in all things, save in being thus well-lined. There were ciphers on it too, but I held it not to unriddle them, or I might perchance have discovered the object of his love. But she has cause to rejoice whoever she be, he loveth her with heart and soul, and she will never know a moment's happiness if she can deceive him."

Estelle scarcely breathed. She now remembered the purse of gold which she had bestowed on Julian the first time she had beheld him; she remembered, too, how that Taquine found the gold on the day following; she thought of his long and silent love, of his faith, and truth, and shuddered.

Father Paul continued:—"I then asked him if he were sure that the bauble he had offered was what he most valued. He smiled, and appeared somewhat undecided, and thought within himself, and then he said at length:

“ ‘ I know not; in truth it were hard to choose between the two.’

“ With that he drew forth, though reluctantly, as if it were of the greatest value—Ha ! ha !—this time it was better than the last—a bunch of half-withered hawthorn ; as though Our Lady were not for ever dressed in flowers, fair and fresh too, and little like those he offered. But I had even better reason for refusing them, I dared not deck her altar with the hawthorn.”

“ And why, Father ?”

“ Ha ! if thou knowest not, sweet daughter, it is not for me to tell thee. I could not refrain from laughter when the young man presented it, and I thought he blushed deeply and appeared to grow angry.”

“ But you obtained the ring, Holy Father ?” said Estelle faintly.

“ Ay, true, I suffered not my zeal to slacken in our righteous Mother’s cause. He still persisted in saying he had nothing more precious

than what I had beheld ; but when I spoke plainly, and of the ring upon his finger, he appeared well-pleased, and said it was a right proper gift to lay at her feet ; that it was a token which he had received not long ago from some mighty friend to let him know that some enterprise on which he had been engaged had succeeded, and it was doubtless owing to her kindly aid. He surrendered then the ring as though it were wholly worthless. Just at that moment I was summoned by the Sacristan to meet the bridal. I prayed and entreated that he would depart, but he said he had another duty to perform before he left the Chapel ; I was forced to leave him standing here, and I doubt me not it was then that he placed the flowers on the tomb of the Countess Mélanie. Think of my horror when I entered here and beheld him ; how was his countenance altered even in that short space ! Much do I pity you, poor children of the world who cannot command your souls to peace . I know not what might have

chanced. When the door opened I was fain to step forward and close it on the instant, or I verily believe he would have rushed out in wrath. He was unarmed, and I trembled so that I scarcely knew what I did; but, praise be to Heaven! when the Duke de Montbel entered, I had pushed the young Ligueur almost by force through the door behind the altar, which opens on the forest, and he is gone."

"It is a right gracious mercy he is gone!"

"Ay, daughter, he is gone! and, alas! I fear me I shall behold him no more! I now regret that I took the ring, but I am old, and have forgotten the days of my youth; for, perchance, he may not have valued it, all rich and splendid as it is, like the simple token from the fair girl he is wooing. I fear me, he will not succeed in the object on which he has set his heart; a votive offering should be made in all purity of spirit, and it looks already as though his ill-fortune had begun."

“Nay, think not so, good Father!” said Estelle hurriedly, for de Montbel, wondering at her long stay in the oratory, was seeking admission.

“But list thee, sweet maiden, I fear me evil will betide the youth, should the Count de la Vallée learn that a Ligueur is to be found at Avilly. Now it would be a goodly thing to try and turn aside his wrath, and to beg for mercy; thou canst surely obtain it on thy bridal-day!”

“Fear not, Father, I will, I will!” said Estelle, as she moved towards the door.

“And list thee further, I know not if thy father could have beheld him standing here; but I verily think he must have seen the Count trampling the garland beneath his feet. In truth, it was an unkindly act—for the young man looked—ah! it could not be at thee that he thus looked—and no one else was discernible through the opening door!”

Estelle could listen no longer, for de Montbel

was growing impatient and was about to enter. She was forced to depart, and with what feelings the reader can best imagine. All expressed astonishment, when she re-appeared, at her long devotions in the oratory, and all were loud and eager in their expressions of sympathy for her sudden indisposition. Her father alone was silent. The doubt and mistrust before imprinted on his countenance had now darkened into a fearful expression of anger and indignation, and he seemed to take no further part in the proceedings of those around him.

The bridal-procession returned, with a vain attempt to renew the gaiety and merriment which had marked its progress to the Chapel ; not that there was any lack of noise and laughter, but there was far less real joy. It was damped and checked by the adventure which had been witnessed at the altar.

The company assembled in the saloon of the chateau. The King, however, soon disappear-

ed, summoning both de Montbel and the King of Navarre to assist in superintending the arrival of the masques who were to form part of the day's pageantry; and the Countess, fancying perhaps that the presence of the Count saddened her other guests, led them to walk for awhile on the terrace. Estelle would not follow; she pleaded fatigue and exhaustion, and the good Countess wondered in herself what could make her thus melancholy on her bridal-day. But yet, when the very same observation was made by some one else, with true feminine perverseness she grew warm, and declared that, considering all things, there was nothing in it so very extraordinary—that all the Hautencours had been sad on their wedding-day—never happy, but wretched and miserable: there was even a tradition among them that one fair bride had verily died on the steps of the altar; no one could tell why. She was fifteen; the bridegroom was rich and noble, and well able to watch over her and guide her with his ex-

perience, seeing that he was old enough to be her grandsire. But the maiden was passing fair and well beloved by all ; and it was handed down as fact, that one of the household, her father's page, a youth of rare beauty and winning gentleness, fretted and pined away soon after ; doubtless overcome by grief at the fate of his young mistress. Whether this specious reasoning served to convince her auditors or not, may be questioned ; it is, however, certain that no opposition was offered, and therefore she remained perfectly satisfied as to its efficacy. But it seemed as though she were yet doomed to mortification, for when she observed, that at least *they* had every fair chance of future happiness who had been united there, pointing with her finger towards the Chapel, the old Count de Noverre, who was half blind and as deaf as a post, instantly replied,

“ Ay, ay, fair enough ! sad pity it is destined ere long to wither and fade away ! ” thinking she had meant to draw his attention to a

drooping-laburnum which was visible from the terrace, and whose golden blossoms were already beginning to scatter the green sward beneath. The Countess was in an awkward predicament, but no one even smiled at her embarrassment. The answer was felt by the superstitious as almost prophetic, and many who lived to see the issue, remembered it as one of the omens which had so strangely served to mar the happiness of the day.

Meanwhile Estelle remained with the Count in the saloon. She expected every moment that he would question her as to the cause of her sudden fainting; and she dreaded it beyond all things, for she was unprepared with appropriate excuses. She could hardly believe her own good fortune, when, instead of appearing to seek conversation with her, he awaited in silence till the promenaders had fairly passed beyond view of the windows, and then taking a paper from the pocket of his vest, he seated himself, and began eagerly to peruse it, without

so much as noticing that she was nigh. As he continued to read, she could not help imagining that his features gradually darkened, until at length rage and jealousy completely mastered every other expression in his countenance. But he spoke not to his daughter; and she had just begun to hope for at least a few moments' peace, when, to her sorrow, Taquine stepped through one of the long glass-doors which opened on the terrace, and entering on tip-toe, as though she feared to attract the Count's attention, seated herself by the side of Estelle, with an evident aim at questioning. The good lady had in truth known no rest since the preceding day. The thought of the youth whom she had beheld in the forest with Estelle haunted her even as much as though she had been captivated. She had followed Estelle in agony ever since; but the latter had been upon her guard, and carefully evaded every attempt on her part to draw her into a conversation. Taquine, however, was not thus easily baffled: she had another

mystery to discover, for she had seen, while Estelle had been engaged at her devotions with Father Paul, what it was intended that no one should see. She had beheld the King beckon the Count de la Vallée into a retired part of the Chapel, and, after conversing for a few moments, place a paper in the hand of the latter, which he had immediately hid in his bosom. Less than this would have put her in a fever of curiosity ; she would have given her best kirtle to know what it could be.

Now Taquine's eyes certainly possessed the double virtue of being able to look within, yet at the same time to know perfectly well all that was going forward without. She had perceived, as she passed the window of the saloon, that Estelle was, comparatively speaking, alone, and that the Count was reading the very paper. There could not be a fitter opportunity of satisfying her thirst of knowledge, and she resolved instantly to profit by it.

" Tell me, dearest !" she began at once,

though her eye was turned upon the Count to watch the workings of his countenance as he read the paper—"tell me, dearest! what reward is fitting to offer to the youth who saved thy life yesterday, by turning aside the fury of the wild boar?"

"Nay, it matters not—he seeketh no reward," returned Estelle impatiently.

"His name, love? what is he called?—tell me quickly."

"It needeth not a thought. Hush! Speak not, Taquine! see you not my father is engaged reading. He will not like to have the silence thus disturbed."

"Fear not; thunder would not rouse him. Listen! I would not tell it to any save thee—the King gave him yonder paper. But I was going to say it is my intent to discover this young man, in order to recompense him as beseemeth thy generosity on thy bridal-day. Thinkest thou he will be at the dance in the evening? I doubt me not but he will. He'

will doubtless rejoice with all the rest of the foresters at thy happy union. I'll ask him, if thou wilt but tell me his name."

"I know it not."

"But wouldst thou not like to know?"

"I care not, in truth," returned Estelle, trembling all the while with terror.

"Verily, thou hast but little gratitude; he is a comely youth. Didst note his large dark eyes and long black ringlets?"

He has stolen your heart, Taquine!" said Estelle, forcing a laugh.

The Count had laid down the paper upon the table, and was bending forward to listen to their whisper.

"Nay, dearest! it is too much the fierce style of beauty—little like de Montbel, so fair and gentle. I marvel much I have not before beheld him in the wood. I'll inquire if he has been seen of any."

"But, Taquine, it surely cannot concern you!" returned Estelle in breathless agitation.

“Nay, in truth but it does concern me; and, shall I tell thee? I have a suspicion that it is—”

“I seek not to hear—it matters not,” interrupted Estelle angrily, for she was sure that the Count had moved his chair nearer to where they were seated, and was endeavouring to listen to their conversation. But Taquine did not perceive it, for she continued,—

“I think that the youth is—nay, it is more than suspicion, I am certain: rely on it, I speak truly; he is the very player who played the part of Acteon, in the masque of Diana and her Nymphs, which thou knowest the King invented out of his own pleasant conceits.”

Estelle was delighted, for her father turned away with an impatient jerk.

But alas! Taquine pursued. “Yes, dearest, now I mind, I would swear it is the very same, by token of the bright green hunting suit wherein he was attired.” The Count de la Vallée looked again towards the speaker; he

bit his lip, that even in breathing he might not disturb her, and prevent her from continuing. And she did continue: "And moreover, dost remember how the vanity of that poor player caused the King to laugh? he would not play the part in horns, they were embroidered on his mantle. And didst mind the short cloak of green velvet which this very youth wore on his shoulder?"—La Vallée wiped his brow, for the perspiration had gathered there.—"Dost mind, Estelle, the cloak—what a lovely green! The King is so generous to his players. Of velvet, too, and worked in gold! A bounding stag—Acteon was turned into a stag—a bounding stag, worked in gold, all raised, and embossed, and cunningly embroidered with the needle."

The Count sank back in his chair almost motionless. Estelle grew sick and faint, not at the observations of Taquine, for she knew not all their import, but at the expression of fierce joy, the dark and lurid smile which hovered on the

lips of her father. He arose and took her hand ; she screamed with agitation at his touch ; he laughed loud at having thus startled her, and called her his timid little simpleton ; but his laugh sounded horrid in her ears, and even the tones of his voice appeared discordant.

“ Come with me, dearest, and sit awhile in my own study, until the masquers come,” said he, leading her almost to the door, ere yet she had recovered recollection. “ Taquine, we will return anon,” he added, as he opened it and went out.

But Taquine cared not if she never again beheld him, for her attention was now taken up by other matters. She had heard a sweet rustling as the Count arose which could not possibly be caused by his soft velvet pourpoint, a rustling more sweet to her ear than the most delicious music ; it was the paper he had been perusing, that had been disturbed by his sudden movement, and which, after sliding gently from the table, had found an invisible refuge

beneath the heavy fauteuil in which he had been seated. Ere yet the fairy foot of Estelle had descended even once upon the marble *parquet* without, Taquine had sprung towards the chair with cat-like eagerness, and drawing the written paper from its hiding-place, began that moment to devour its contents, not even taking time to rise, but still upon her knees, and using the soft cushion as a reading-desk, thus perused in a tumult of wonder, which made her entirely forget "Diana and her Nymphs," as well as "the youth with the long black ringlets."

The Count hurried his daughter into his own private study, the same apartment to which she had been summoned on the very night she had for the first time beheld Julian l'Evêque. She thought her father must have seen him in the oratory, and it was enough that he should know by his dress that he was a Ligueur.

But he did not suffer her long to remain in.

uncertainty ; with hurried movement he closed the door and doubly locked it ; then, scarcely able to control his agitation, he turned to the terrified maiden, and exclaimed in breathless haste,

“ Who was it thou didst see yesterday in the forest ? Tell me instantly, sweet Estelle. It is of import to me that I should know quickly—this moment—without delay. Nay, keep me not in suspense, I pray thee. Knowest thou his name ? Didst ever before behold him ? ”

“ I—I—know not. I—was in truth terrified—I— ”

“ Stammer not, maiden. I seek not to harm him ; but—but—by Heaven, play me not false—it was the same—the very same ! Speak truth,—thou didst behold him in the oratory, and the sight of his plume and badge it was that caused thy fainting.”

Estelle breathed not ; the words of the Count seemed to have deprived her even of the very

faculty of speech. She answered not. The sound of the recorders was heard from the garden, where the masquers were assembling, and the Count de la Vallée lost all power of controlling his impatience.

“Trifle not, Estelle; thou knowest that thou hast seen the youth before. Look not thus, but tell me on the instant.”

“Father, we spoke of the youth who — who did rescue me from death yesterday, down by the river: he is a hunter—a perfect stranger.”

Again did the silver sound of the recorders ascend through the open window; the jingling bells of the dancers in the pageant, the hum of men’s voices, and the busy trampling of feet, now mingled, and drove the Count almost to distraction.

“Out upon thy hypocrisy!” he exclaimed, stamping his foot; “think not thus to deceive me. Are my grey hairs to be thus beguiled? Verily, yonder crown of jewels has turned

thy giddy brain. What caused thee thus to tremble and turn pale when that silly gossip questioned thee concerning him, if there had been nothing to conceal? Shame on thee, Estelle; thou wert aware that a Ligueur lingered nigh, and didst not even tell me!" Estelle sobbed aloud, and the Count continued; "I had almost thought it was a vision, but now I know it was truth. Thou canst not deny that thou didst behold him likewise. I go hence to seek him out ere yet he can depart, and—"

"Nay, nay, dear father, do not so," almost shrieked Estelle, falling at her father's feet; "stay, if thou lovest me. In truth, thou hast divined aright. I do know the Ligueur. I saw him at Jacqueline's cottage, whither thou didst bid me go to discover Count Adhémar. But thou wilt have mercy. I ask it on my bended knees: it is my bridal-day, and have I not ever done all to please and comfort thee? He is already bowed down and

persecuted, homeless and friendless, and—and what greater ill wouldst thou now bring down upon his head?”

The Count de la Vallée stood petrified with astonishment.

“Then the cottage of old Jacqueline is thus a harbour for traitors,” he exclaimed, bursting with rage; “and thou, my own daughter, hast—”

“Ah, think it not, dear father. As I hope for mercy, he does not live with Jacqueline; but she had known him in happier days, and—”

The sound of footsteps was heard in the corridor; there was not a moment to lose. The Count collected himself by a vast effort; he raised his daughter and kissed her in seeming fondness, though in haste and agitation.

“Ah, thou dost fear for Jacqueline; but, dearest, there is no cause. And the young Ligueur, would I harm him either? Has he not saved thy life? Dost know where he has

taken refuge? I will seek him out. I will forget all party spirit, and reward him kindly."

The deep tones of his voice trembled with eagerness and fear while he was speaking to Estelle, and yet he turned, and shouted with rage, when some one knocked at the door, to summon him to the revel below. "We come, we come! stand not there, fools; away! we can descend without your aid." He turned again to Estelle, and smiled, but his smile was dark and ghastly.

"Tell me, sweet love, where has the youth sought concealment? It would rejoice me to do an act of kindness on thy marriage-day, and if de Montbel will consent—"

"My own dear father!" said Estelle, in guileless admiration, "de Montbel has already the will to aid him."

"Ha! indeed!" said the Count in feigned surprise; "and knoweth he the Ligueur's abode?"

"Ay, indeed, he does; and was it not kind to

keep it secret? We have cause to rejoice that he is thus generous; the Ligneur sheltered us in his own dwelling that awful night of storm and tempest;—dost remember it, dear father?"

She twined her fair arms round his neck, and leaned her soft pale cheek against his, which was now so flushed with passion; but he knew well how to disguise all symptoms of wrath, and that gentleness alone could win the secret from his daughter.

"It was kind, in truth," he said, "but I would not be outdone in generosity: where shall I seek him, that I may prove that—that—de Montbel is not his only friend?"

He drew Estelle upon his knee, and clasped her round the waist: her heart beat violently. The time had come at last when she was enabled to be of service to the preserver of her life. She laughed, partly in fear and partly in delight, and whispered in her father's ear, "In the deep glen, so dark and dismal; it is called the 'Wolf's Covert' by those who know the forest."

“ Blessings on thee, dearest ! I will seek him ; his sufferings shall ere long be ended.” An impatient knock was heard at the door. “ Curses on ye, fools !” he exclaimed, fiercely, “ did I not say I would descend anon ? Sweet love, thou hast relieved me from a load of sorrow. Rely on it, I will do my best to put a period — nay, by the mass, who knocks thus rudely ?—even though it were my greatest enemy, even though it were Adhémar d’Espighac !—”

“ Nay, dear father, it is no enemy ; he has been ever sad and melancholy ; but now how altered is his fortune ! De Montbel will aid him,—and the King of Navarre,—and now thou wilt assist him. Seek him to-night, else he will away on some——Ha ! it is de Montbel’s voice at the door.—But, above all, speak not of me to the Ligueur—to—to Julian l’Evêque, for I—”

“ Fear not, I will not name thee. I will succour him. He shall know misery no more.

Breathe not a word to de Montbel. It is he—it is he,” shouted the Count, as he unlocked the door, and sprang down the steps of the terrace into the garden, leaving Estelle in a kind of stupor, from which she was aroused by de Montbel, who had come to lead her to witness the pageant which the King had so kindly prepared for her amusement.

All that day was spent in revelry. She had not even time to think. The banquet followed the masques, and the dance followed the banquet. The King himself trod a measure with the bride, and it was not until then that she was allowed a moment to herself. The ball-room was crowded with all the gaiety and splendour of the Court ; but La Vallée was not there, and Estelle alone knew the cause of his absence.

She turned from the joyous scene, and seated herself in a bay-window that looked out upon the garden. The casement was open, and she leaned out. The night was dark and cloudy ; not a star was to be seen ; but the sounds of

music and revelry were heard from the hall where the servants were making merry, and were joyous enough to drive all thoughts of gloom away. The brilliant lights from the apartment shone upon the grass-plot before the windows so vividly that the flowers planted round,—even their graceful forms and variegated colours,—were distinguishable. The shadows of the dancers, as they moved to and fro, would sometimes darken it for a moment, and then, vanishing away, leave it light as before. She heard a foot-fall upon the garden-walk. She looked, and recognized the figure of an old *garde-forêt* in the service of the Count. He had in his youth been one of the Count d'Espignac's huntsmen, and even to this day was suspected of retaining almost as fond an attachment to the old family as Jacqueline. He stood against the wall of the terrace at some little distance, and as he leaned against the brick-work his form was almost imbedded amid the dark ivy which hung in festoons over

it. He sighed, and so deeply that it even reached the ear of Estelle, and filled her with a strange feeling of melancholy; and soon some one else stepped out from the hall door. It was his son. The youth was full of mirth and spirits; he had missed the old man from the hall, and had kindly run to know the cause of his absence.

“Why come you not, father?” said he, as he unbuttoned his vest and wiped his forehead, as though he were heated with the dancing; “you are missing all that is most merry of the festival. Come, the kindness of Monseigneur has provided for those who seek not to dance. There is store of wine to drink the bride’s health!”

“Leave me, good Isidore,” said the old man. “It is kindly meant of thee, but my soul is sad to-night; my spirit is oppressed, and I cannot shake it off. I feel as if I should choke were I to drink the health of the young bride!”

"And what is your cause of sadness, father?" said the youth affectionately.

"I know not, in truth. I have a mournful warning, a foreboding of misfortune: didst never feel it, boy? But no, thou art too young and happy. But, can I rejoice? I saw the Count de la Vallée in the Chapel, when he had all cause of happiness, and need not have insulted the memory of those who were sleeping almost beneath his feet—I saw him, in the pride of his heart, trample to earth the flower that was once our forest pride, and I rushed out on the instant. The day has been one of woe to me, Isidore! I could have wept; nay, I will not say I did not weep as I wandered through the forest, and went to seek the bounding stag which I so oft have told thee of. I thought it would cheer my spirit but to see it even once more, and—Isidore!—"

"Father!"

"It is gone, it is gone! ay, there is no longer a hope!—it is gone, and Count Adhémar will never return!"

The old man paused.

“ Think not so, dear father,” said the youth at length.

“ Nay, but I know it, Isidore. As I returned homeward, I was thinking of Count Adhémar, when a figure crossed my path so like my dream of him, that it has haunted my mind from that hour. I have roamed through the wood the whole day, but I saw it not again. Not a soul did I meet even to-night; they are all here at the festival. But there is mystery abroad: tell it to none. Guilbert has just returned from guiding a party of armed men to the Wolf’s Covert; he was paid by the Count de la Vallée, and knows not their destination.”

“ It is passing strange !” said Isidore, thoughtfully.

“ Nay, perchance it might be easily explained. It has not saddened my spirit even half so much as my waking dream. It could not be himself: thinkest thou it was his spirit ?

But no, he must yet be in life, if there be truth in prophecy. He is the last of the d'Espignacs, and they say Count Hubert's requiem will be heard once more when the soul of the last of his race shall pass away. But I know not how I feel, a kind of restless misery is now upon me, it will leave me ere long. I will hie me homeward, and to sleep. Farewell, dear boy; be not in haste to leave the revel, there is time enough for thee, thou mayest tarry till morn."

"Nay, depart not, father!" cried young Isidore, in accents of terror: "leave me not—I tremble! Hear you that awful sound? Nay, what is it fills my soul with such dismay? Hark! it is borne from the wood, and swells even above the noise of the viols and the dancing. But, dost thou hear it, father? Speak presently, or I shall straightway sink with terror!"

The old man bent forward, but Estelle did not hear him reply. She heard alone that

sound of death swelling in mournful majesty amid the deep stillness of the forest—the sad, sad requiem of the d’Espignacs !

It was heard by all. The dancing suddenly ceased in the servants’-hall ; the company in the ball-room crowded round the window where Estelle sat, and soon torches were seen glancing to and fro amid the darkness ; and the garden, and the court-yard, and the terrace were all filled with the terrified listeners to that mournful sound. It ceased at length, and then the silence that ensued appeared more awful still. Vain were all attempts to restore hilarity.

“ It is just midnight,” cried the King of Navarre : “ who would think to leave us yet ? At de Montbel’s bridal we should dance till dawn ! ”

No one answered the challenge, and soon the apartment was deserted, and all had retired ; the lights were extinguished, and the sounds of mirth and music were heard no more.

The very next day de Montbel bore away his bride into Gascony. The parting of the Count with his daughter was to all appearance full of tenderness, so far as tears and fond words could make it; and yet he strictly avoided all private speech with her, and to her anxious whisper if he had seen Julian l'Evêque, he returned a hurried answer—"I have seen him; and fear not, —thanks be to thee, he ne'er will grieve again!" She clung to the reply, all ambiguous as it was, with delight; for on the evening before a horrid surmise had shot across her mind, but it was too horrid to bear, and she rejected it in terror. "Forget not thy promise—breathe not a word to de Montbel!" These were his words of farewell; he hastened her departure; and when she went out with the long train of guards and attendants gorgeously arrayed, he was rejoiced, for de Montbel went with her, and no one besides the Duke possessed the power to render the King vigilant and clear-sighted. Estelle smiled to all in kindness; but many shook their heads as

they bade adieu and blessed her with a tone which they would not have used if they had thought that all would be well, and that they should behold her again in happiness.

Great was the surprise that morning among the inhabitants of Avilly. With sound of trumpet and beat of drum, the King's herald paraded even to the very boundary of the land; declaring, by royal mandate, the attainder to be removed from the estate of Count Adhémar d'Espignac; that he was restored to his honours and his titles, and that they would descend to his children's children.

All were glad; even the Count de la Vallée; but his joy was dark, and should have excited suspicion more than the most violent grief: all were astonished save Taquine, for she had read the proclamation in the saloon. But soon it became a familiar subject of conversation among the courtiers; La Vallée was to hold the land till Count Adhémar came to claim it, and Count Adhémar had bought back his estate with important service. He was gone to Paris to seek

the chiefs of the Ligue, to propose peace and accommodation, with mutual advantage; and the time when the delights of the capital would once more be open to them, was looked forward to with the greatest impatience, and they awaited anxiously Count Adhémar's return. They learnt, but now without dismay, that he had long hovered near Chantilly; that he had ventured thither to wreak vengeance on King Henry; but that from such dark purpose he had been turned by the King of Navarre, while de Montbel had undertaken to conciliate the King. All had succeeded as they wished, and thus they might now look forward to a time of peace when they would all be united as they had been heretofore. The King of Navarre would delight to tell of the goodness of de Montbel, and the noble mind of Adhémar, never thinking to speak of his own goodness, or of his own noble mind, nor of the endless exertions he had made to bring about this much-desired reconciliation.

But meanwhile the time waned away; the

King grew weary of the absence of de Montbel ; Henry de Navarre grew more than weary of inaction ; Count Adhémar returned not from his mission ; days and weeks slipped by, and no tidings were heard respecting him. The two monarchs were first surprised, then indignant : they despatched a messenger to de Mayenne, the chief of the Ligue, who had sent to the King of Navarre Count Adhémar's signet ring, now in possession of Father Paul, as token that he was willing to receive the Count d'Espignac once more as friend and brother ;—the messenger was received with insult and contumely ! The King of Navarre was not a man tamely to submit to indignity ; neither was the King, when once awakened. They felt sure that Count Adhémar had returned to the Ligue : they thought he had forgotten his oath ; that he had turned traitor to their cause ; and the resolve was taken to lay siege at once before the walls of Paris. They summoned de Montbel, for they knew it would break his heart to be absent

when they were fighting on the field of glory. They tarried his arrival ; but, ere he came, a dark mysterious event had taken place—the Count de la Vallée was no more ! It was strange—nay, almost supernatural ! He had gone out in the morning with horse and hound, amid the princely guests by whom it had ever been his delight to be surrounded. He had gone out in pride, and mounted on his steed, and had returned a bleeding corse, and borne upon men's shoulders ! This was all they knew ; but when de Montbel came, and they told him that he had met his death in the wood, and none knew by whose hand—that a bullet had made the wound, and that the life-blood had poured in torrents from his side, he grew uneasy, and knew no rest. He caused the spot to be carefully searched ; and, amid the furze and brambles near, a forester's rifle, with its silver mounts and golden studs, was discovered. The occurrence but added to his perplexity, for he would not believe that its owner would have forfeited

honour and good name for the sake of such mean and cowardly revenge. But no one cared to unravel the mystery: it was enough to the foresters that the Count de la Vallée was gone. He had no friends—they had all been sacrificed to his ambition; and even when the kind-hearted de Montbel told the King, and marvelled, and said it was strange, Henry replied, with his usual levity, “Ay, strange indeed, *mon compère*, and truly, passing strange! but knowest thou? it would have been stranger still had the Count de la Vallée even *died* without a mystery!”

It was after this event that Estelle was again seen at Avilly; but, oh! how changed since she left it! They rallied de Montbel upon her looks, and said that she must have been deceived in him; that he had given her secret cause of grief. But he was not a whit altered; still merry and thoughtless as ever. He could not perceive the change they spoke of; and if it were really there, the cause must have been

fatigue,—exertion,—that the air of Gascony agreed not well with her, and it was any thing but grief.

But he was soon compelled to leave her. The two monarchs, now by his own generous exertions united in the closest bonds of friendship, and vying with each other only in eagerness for glory, encamped before the walls of Paris, and Estelle remained at Avilly. She was now its mistress ; Count Adhémar returned not,—La Vallée was no more,—and thus it had come to de Montbel at last, after his most singular efforts to restore it to its rightful owner ; and when she was at liberty to roam once more where best beseeemed her fancy, she remembered her old friendships, and her old attachments, and sought with bursting heart the cottage of Jacqueline. She hurried through the well-remembered paths, and would not tarry even to take one glance around ; she dreaded the recollections that would crowd upon her mind. Her heart throbbed wildly as

she drew near,—the once happy smiling abode of the *vachère* was now in ruins. The door was open,—it was empty and desolate, for there was nothing within to guard. She crossed the small apartment, and went into the garden. Here the desolation was even more apparent ; it was overgrown with weeds, and caused her heart to ache as she thought on its former neatness and beauty. Before her stood the hawthorn, at the foot of the high bank which Julian had climbed. How well did she remember that moment of woe and terror. But the tree was withered and dried up ; not a leaf was to be seen, not even upon its topmost bough, and its naked, ragged branches were stretched over the spot where she had sat with the forester nearly the whole of that eventful day. She approached, and soon perceived the cause of its decay. A rude cross, formed of two unwrought stakes of wood, was fastened with long nails against the trunk.

She wept as she leaned against the tree,—

she knew not why ; but the morning was dull and gloomy, and the desolation around her might well dispose to grief. She was about to leave the spot in mournful disappointment, when a slight noise was heard near at hand, and a well-known voice whispered in hollow death-like tones—

“ Ay, it is well ; weep for him, lady, he well deserves your tears !”

Estelle was almost terrified, when she turned, to behold old Jacqueline herself. She perceived at once, by the haggard look and wild unsteady gazing of her eye, how it had fared with her since she had left Avilly. It was evident she did not recognize Estelle, for she turned away, and added, “ He lies there !” pointing to the mound beneath the hawthorn.

“ Who lies there, good mother ?” said Estelle gently.

“ What ! know you not who died yonder, down in the glen they call the Wolf's Covert ?”

“ Ha !” exclaimed Estelle, as she sank back—

ward, and grasped the rude cross with unconscious energy.

“What! did you not hear? It was Count Adhémar, the d’Espignac of the Forest! Tell it to no one,—but he was murdered!—ay, murdered! and by the Count de la Vallée!” It was well that Jacqueline continued vehemently, for, had she paused, Estelle would have sunk at her feet. “List you: they stabbed him through the heart, and through the neck, and in the side; ay, and there were tens and twenties, all armed ruffians, and they covered him with wounds. Oh! had you but seen how the strong life-blood gushed forth, it would have seared your eyes, as it has done mine! I have seen nothing aright since then.”

She placed her hand before her eyes, as if to shut out the light, and again drew near to Estelle. “Did I tell you?—nay, come close, that I may whisper it softly,—it was the Count de la Vallée. Think on his stony heart: he was not satisfied to take his land and all that was his, but he even came in the stillness of the

night, (else had they not brooked the fire of his eye,) and took away his life. But this was not all. There was the Count's daughter,—she who married the Duke de Montbel, and went into Gascony,—did you know her?"

Estelle made no reply.

"She was fair, and I loved her once; I could have wept if the slightest harm had come to her; but now!"—the eyes of the old woman suddenly assumed the fiery glare of madness, and she extended her withered arms towards her pale and shrinking listener;—"but now, I curse her with my heart and soul! she shall know no peace—her life shall consume even as mine has consumed away, for she it was that did betray him unto death! But listen to what is yet more foul and treacherous; she had not known his place of refuge, if she had not been sheltered from the storm, and succoured from the fangs of the forest wolf."

Estelle bit her lip in convulsive agony, that she might refrain from shrieking aloud.

"Ah, you answer not!" resumed Jacqueline

quickly, "but I know you think it horrible, and yet you have not heard the whole of her dark deceit. It was only on the eve of that very day that she swore eternal faith to Julian—ay, he was then Julian l'Evêque—my Julian;—and he came to me, and told me how blest he was—for, shall I tell you, lady?—he loved the maiden—nay, if I were to stand till midnight I could not tell how Adhémar d'Espignac doted on the very foot-prints of Estelle de la Vallée."

She paused, and drew something from her bosom, which she held up that Estelle might behold.

"See, lady, if I spoke not truth. It was once a purse of sky-blue silk, a bauble nothing worth, but she gave it, and he wore it next his heart; it is crimson now, and with his blood! See, the knife went right through and cut the cipher!" The last words seemed again to bring his death to mind, and she continued, while the tones of her voice quivered slightly, "But he is revenged!—it was I who shot the

Count de la Vallée—Nay, start not, was it not well deserved? But—ha! ha! ha!”—she laughed wildly,—“think you, I had never pulled a trigger before that day, and yet the ball went straight into his heart! But then it was Adhémar’s own rifle, and could not miss its aim. And I laughed to see him die. How different he looked to Adhémar! he struggled, and shrieked, and called for aid;—but Adhémar stood proudly up and advanced to meet his murderers, and when he fell he spoke not, nor begged, nor sued for mercy; he breathed his own requiem from his silver bugle—the death-note of the d’Espignacs, and when the last sound faded, his soul had passed away.”

She paused for a moment. A bystander would have thought that the gentle spirit of the youthful Duchess would have fled with every gushing sob that burst from her bosom.

“Nay, you are kind to weep thus,” said the old woman: “Adhémar thought he had no friend save his dog, old Perceforêt; and he

was right; it was the only true one that he had. I thought that I had loved the youth, but it could not be; I loved him not, or I should not have told him that Estelle de la Vallée was good and tender-hearted, and that he might rely upon her truth.—No—no, Perceforêt alone loved him; he stood by him to the last, he was sorely wounded in his defence, and when his master was no more, he pined away—poor silly brute!—because, forsooth, he could not warm the clay-cold corse.”

She again pointed to the mound of earth beneath the hawthorn, from which Estelle had drawn aside with a shudder.

“He sleeps yonder at his master’s feet. If the youth had lain his head with his father’s in the forest chapel, it had been chiselled in the costly marble. But think you he sleeps not here as soundly?—ay, indeed does he; there will be no merry bridals here, nor busy feet to trample over his grave. Father Paul and I—we laid him softly in his low bed—for—for—

now again my blood is boiling—the ruffians said that they came in the King's name, and Adhémair cursed the treachery of those who had pretended to serve him with the King. But bethink you of the hypocrisy of the Count de la Vallée; the King had pardoned Count Adhémair, and the grey-haired villain knew it well, and trembled to yield up the land. Father Paul hath retired to the Monastery of Croix, but I would not go away, and they dismantled my cottage as you see, thinking to drive me elsewhere; but I will not depart, for even in death I will not desert Count Adhémair!”

Estelle was bowed almost to the earth; there was silence, and when she raised her eyes Jacqueline was gone.

After this event life seemed to have lost all interest for the Duchess de Montbel, and she no longer opposed the rapid decline of her feeble strength. She used every exertion again to discover Jacqueline to preserve her from want, and learnt with satisfaction, that an aged

woman had appeared at the gate of the monastery of Croix to receive the accustomed dole ; that a friar, whose name did not appear, had succoured her with kindness ; and in that house of holiness she had expired in peace. Not long after, the Duchess herself was borne to the grave with waving plume and gaudy scutcheon, as though she had not left one aching heart behind.

The memory of Count Adhémar is completely cleared from treachery, and these events are known. The papers of the Count de la Vallée, the evidence of Father Paul, have rendered them no longer doubtful.

And de Montbel, poor de Montbel ! who fondly thought to have laid up whole years of future happiness with Estelle de la Vallée, —his grief was silent, but not the less sincere. His thoughtless companions said to each other, that Estelle was not the bride for him ; that she had saddened his spirit ; that he soon would choose another, whose soul was merry as his

own; but they were deceived: he still remained the King's prime favourite, and still exerted himself to please his master. Honours, riches, titles, were showered down upon his head, but he thought of Estelle, of her sweet patience and winning gentleness, and smiled no more. His fate resembled in all, save in the deserving it, that of de Cressy, of whom it was said, "Il fut grand, il fut distingué, il obtint tous les titres, tout les honneurs qu'il avoit désirés: il fut riche, il fut élevé, mais il ne fut point heureux!"

But then at length came that treacherous deed—that fiend-like murder! Henry de Valois slept with his fathers! All were gone—the youthful bride of yesterday, the friend of many years, and he cared not to stay behind. He flung away his life beneath the walls of Paris, and Avilly again became the property of the Crown.

The chateau was suffered to fall into decay. In consequence of the disappearance of its

rightful lord, and the mysterious death of the Count de la Vallée, none could be found to inhabit it. It has now passed away, and not a stone is left to tell of its ancient glory ; but deep in the wood, through the *carrefour d'Enghien*, may be found the sweet and smiling village that still bears the name of Avilly.

THE PAGE:

A LEGEND OF LA MORLAYE.

THE PAGE.

CHAPTER I.

The Moor, albeit that I hate him,
Is of a noble loving nature.

SHAKSPEARE.

FAR imbosomed in the great forest of Chantilly stood the magnificent Castle of the once powerful Barons of La Morlaye. The site is now all that remains, but the deep moat which once surrounded the castle may still be traced; although dried up and choked with brushwood, it serves but as the lurking-place where

the solitary she-wolf hides her young brood, and reigns undisturbed tenant of that gloomy hollow.

In proportion as civilization has increased, and the wood has been cleared, the inhabitants have drawn nearer to its outskirts. The small village which now bears the name of La Morlaye is situated more than two leagues from the entrance, and merely serves to rescue from complete oblivion the name of the once redoubted owners of that vast forest domain.

During the latter part of the eighth century the Castle was in the possession of the young Baron Clodomir de la Morlaye, whose daring bravery in the various struggles which he had had to sustain with the lawless banditti of the forest, had struck terror into the hearts of the boldest of their leaders, and formed the theme of many a minstrel lay. Throughout the courts

of Europe, wherever harp was struck, in banquet-hall or lady's bower, the name of Clodomir was almost as familiar as that of the great Roland himself. Kind and generous in peace as he was dauntless in the field, he became idolized by his followers, who in every emergency relied with unbounded confidence on the superior skill and bravery of their youthful Lord; nor was there one who would have hesitated to sacrifice even life itself in defence of his honour and safety. It was this devotion to his person which had hitherto rendered them invincible. Whenever he led them to battle they returned victorious, and the little band of La Morlaye, undisturbed by private feuds, and joining heart and hand in whatever cause their patron espoused, became a valuable addition to the French army.

It was the deep policy of the Emperor Charlemagne, whether in the field or at the court,

to have the most powerful of his nobles under his own immediate eye, and by keeping them employed at a distance from their homes, to prevent them engaging in those old hereditary feuds and that petty warfare which had disturbed the reign of his predecessor. Thus was it with La Morlaye ; he had been summoned to join the Emperor against the Moors of Spain, and leaving his lovely wife and young heir to the protection of a few of his most devoted followers, had taken his departure to reap new laurels and add fresh lustre to his name. The lady of La Morlaye had already mourned the absence of her lord for nearly a year, and yet no tidings had reached her of his fate. In those days the most important news travelled but slowly, and only by private messengers, who were liable, from the state of the country, to be robbed and sometimes murdered on the road ; and thus it not unfrequently happened, that those who

had long been mourned as dead returned in safety after a lapse of years to their deserted homes.

The Lady Blanche wept in secret anguish as day after day passed by and she still remained in uncertainty respecting her husband's fate. "He will never return," thought the young mother, as she strained her baby to her bosom ; "Clodomir the Brave will never return ! They will take thee from me, my child—Robert, the cruel Robert, will tear thee from me !" She shuddered at the thought, and would then exclaim, "Ah ! God forbid, my boy, that aught of mine should ever have to seek mercy at the hand of the cold-hearted Robert the Red !"

At length tidings reached her from the camp, but such as could only increase anxiety ; the great army had been routed by the Moors at Roncevalles—the great Charlemagne defeated ; Roland, the brave Roland slain ! It was not to

be believed—no, it could not be possible ; it was some device of the enemy to strike terror into the hearts of the French. But the return of Charlemagne himself, with the remnant of his shattered army, but too plainly confirmed the truth of the evil tidings. Hope again visited the heart of the Lady Blanche, as the nobles returned one by one, with diminished followers, to their respective domains in the neighbourhood, until at last the Castle of La Morlaye was the only one not graced by the presence of its master. Expectation, however, soon gave way to the most fearful surmises at the reappearance in the Castle of a solitary henchman of the Baron's, whose story did but increase in a tenfold degree the anxiety of the Baroness respecting her lord. He stated, that La Morlaye and his followers, who had fought desperately in the battle at Roncevalles, had withdrawn the last from the scene of action,

and not until they had left many of their brave band dead on the field, among whom was his master's own cousin, the valiant Red Robert : that having himself been separated from them in the fray, he had in vain attempted to rejoin them, and supposing that with the rest of the army they had taken the road to France, he, too, had followed thither, fully expecting to find his beloved master at La Morlaye. At these tidings messengers were despatched in various directions, for it was feared he had fallen into the hands of the robbers in his passage through the forest ; and the well-known hatred of these lawless desperadoes to the very name of La Morlaye, caused the bold hearts of his retainers to sink under the most dismal forebodings.

Affairs were in this state at the castle, when one sultry summer's day a small party, consisting of some score or two of horsemen, was seen

slowly winding its way through the mazes of the forest towards La Morlaye. The dusty and worn-out condition of the horses, with the weary looks and sun-burnt brows of their riders, told plainly that they were returning from fighting in the South; while the silent trumpets and furled banners of the party showed, alas! that they did not return victorious. The Knight who appeared to be the leader of the band, was a young man of noble mien and courteous aspect, apparently of not more than five-and-twenty summers, perhaps even less; for it would seem that hard service in a foreign clime, and long exposure to a southern sun, had darkened his complexion; which in those parts, generally concealed by the pressure of the helmet, showed the clear, fair tint of the Northerns. He was clad in a suit of bright steel armour, of the most rare and costly workmanship. His handsome countenance was seen

to the best advantage; for, owing to the heat, he wore on his head a small cap of black velvet, decorated with a single feather, and looped with a string of jewels, to replace the ponderous helmet which now hung at his saddle-bow, where its long and beautiful plumes of milk-white nearly swept the ground. Over his corslet he wore a scarf of white and azure, richly embroidered in quaint devices and coats-of-arms, by the fair hands of his lady love. The emblazoning on his shield represented the rising-sun, with the motto, "*Je parois pour ramener bonheur.*" Memory seemed busy in the mind of the young Knight as his steed slowly paced the well-remembered path, for his kindling eye and heightening colour, as he listlessly sat in the saddle, showed that his thoughts were far away; and the eagerness of his gaze towards La Morlaye plainly spoke the direction they had taken. By his side rode a tall

Knight, whose coal-black steed and armour formed a striking contrast to the gay bearing and milk-white charger of his companion. Although past the first bloom of youth, his features might yet have been accounted handsome, but for the dark and lowering brow, which, overshadowing eyes whose habitual expression seemed to be that of scorn and defiance, imparted an air of sternness, almost amounting to ferocity, to his swarthy countenance. Notwithstanding the heat, he still retained his helmet, which, like his armour, was jet-black, and surmounted by long plumes of the deepest crimson. The scarf which adorned his corslet was also of the same fiery colour, and was the only ornament he wore to relieve the sombre hue of his appearance. He carried an enormous shield, on which was emblazoned a pierced and bleeding heart, with the fierce motto, "*Je meurs sans fléchir.*"

The two Knights journeyed on for some time in silence, each apparently occupied with his own reflections ; but it was remarked that the handsome countenance of the younger Knight gradually brightened as he advanced through the forest, while that of his companion darkened at every step. At length, upon reaching an opening in the wood, the Knight of the rising-sun was the first to break silence, by exclaiming in an impatient tone, “ Our steeds seem over long in reaching the goodly Wolf’s-head, Robin ; pray Heaven, our old neighbour de Cerisac may not have removed our landmark ;”—he rose in the stirrup as he spoke to gaze in the distance—“ Ah, no !” he continued, “ there it stands, firm and brave as ever ! “ Foul befall de Cerisac, when the wild boar seeks to replace the ~~wolf in~~ our forest !” striking at the same moment with his iron glove the crest on his helmet, which showed the grisly wolf’s head, with such violence, as

to cause his horse to start and trot forward a few paces, bringing him quickly past the huge stone pillar, rudely carved to represent a wolf, with the portentous words, "N'y touchez," cut in old Gothic letters beneath."

Once past the well-known border-mark, new spirits seemed infused into the whole party. Even the tired and jaded steeds forgot their weariness, and galloped briskly forward, while their glad riders hailed with loud and long-continued shouts their leader's safe return to La Morlaye. The Red Knight alone seemed to take no part in the feelings of his fellow-travellers; although frequently urged to conversation by the young Knight, to whom each tree or bush that they passed seemed pregnant with fond recollection, and whose spirits rose in proportion as they drew near to their journey's end. At length, turning to his silent friend, the young Knight gaily exclaimed,

“ Welcome ! welcome once more to La Morlaye, Robin, mine own brave kinsman ! ” Little did I ever think to see thee safe in our own forest again, when I found thee bleeding and senseless among our dead comrades ! In good sooth, thou didst not then belie thy title. ’Fore God ! I could have chosen Robert the Red from among them all ! ” There was no answer, and the young Knight proceeded, somewhat reproachfully ; “ And yet, now methinks thou dost not wear the joyous mien thou wert wont in days of yore, when we trotted gaily homeward from our hard encounters with the robbers.”

“ Ay, Clodomir the Brave, but then we returned victorious, and knew nor defeat nor dishonour ! ” was Robert’s stern reply ; but after a moment’s pause, he added in a gentler tone, “ I thank thee, Clodomir, for thy kindly welcome : thou wert ever good and generous beyond my



deserts, and even now I owe thee my life ! But it was not thus," pointing with a contemptuous gesture to their diminished retinue, " that we had hoped to greet La Morlaye !"

The open brow of the young Knight crimsoned at the remark.

" Nay, nay," he hastily replied, " if thou lookest there, in the very scantiness of my followers thou wilt see sure and honourable proof of their worthiness ; for, of a truth, more of our brave varlets lie dead on the field of Roncevalles than now return in safety, which those who witnessed our departure can well testify. But they are fallen with Roland the Brave, and none save cowards would mourn their fate !" He mused in silence for a moment, and then added, as if suddenly recollecting, " Besides, thou hast forgotten, we lack one in himself a host, thine own faithful esquire, who, too tender, forsooth, to tarry merely to witness the sickness and agony of the beloved

master to whom he owed so much, straightway took his departure, leaving the wounded invalid to the care of one, a blunt and honest soldier, who, albeit but a sorry nurse, loved him too well to forsake him in time of danger !”

A dark scowl passed over the countenance of the Red Knight at this sarcasm, but his companion, who saw it, heeded it not: a sight of far greater interest, which had brought back the warm and ready smile, engaged his attention. The party had reached the summit of the hill, up which they had been long toiling, and the huge towers and frowning battlements of the Castle of La Morlaye lay stretched in the valley beneath.

For a moment Clodomir gazed on his own noble heritage in rapture, and forgetting his recent resentment, he again addressed his companion.

“ In truth, Robin,” said he, “ this is the

goodliest sight I have beheld this many a-day !
Ay, there it stands, our own dear La Morlaye,
the same as last we saw it !—the same as in my
dreams I have oft beheld it !” He stretched his
arms fondly towards the Castle, but suddenly
he started in dismay, and exclaimed, while a
death-like paleness overspread his features,
“ By Heavens ! it is not the banner of the La
Morlayes that floats from yonder tower ! Canst
thou distinguish, Robin ?—it may be mine eyes
are dim. But stay, I had forgot ; let us call
hither our Moorish prisoner, he will tell us on
the instant ; thou knowest the eyes of these
Southrons are trained to view objects in the
distance.”

He turned, yet trembling with agitation.

“ El Adhel !” called he in a loud voice, and
before the words were well pronounced, the
ranks of the men-at-arms opened, and a Moorish
youth of exquisite beauty, clad in the gorgeous

costume of his nation, and mounted on a fiery Arabian palfrey, dashed from the midst and galloped to his side in an instant.

“What wills my Lord?” said he in a voice whose soft and silvery tones fell on the ear like music.

“El Adhel, yonder is my home,” said Clodomir, “but it is not the banner of my race that is floating from the battlements.”

He pointed to La Morlaye. The quick perceptions of the Moor enabled him to discern in a moment the purpose for which he had been called. Placing both his hands to his brow, to shade the light, he gazed long and earnestly in the distance, and answered in Gascon French, (a dialect which was understood on both sides of the Pyrenees)—

“It is the black banner that streams on the Castle of my Lord, and death, alas! is within its walls!”

The marble brow of the young Baron became still paler at these words.

“ Oh God !” he exclaimed in quivering accents, “ I was not prepared for this ! Blanche ! —the boy ! Look again, Saracen ; say if thine eagle eye can discern any thing moving : look towards the tower in the eastern wing, for that is my lady’s bower !”

The Moor again looked steadfastly towards the Castle, and after a moment’s pause, replied,

“ I see a Christian lady leading a fair-haired child upon the ramparts ! Now she advances, and looks towards where we stand. She has distinguished my Lord, for she waves her scarf ; it is white and azure !”

The youth raised his eyes to the pennon of Clodomir’s lance, which displayed the same two colours, and again dropped them, as though they were strained to the utmost. These sentences were uttered with great rapidity, and

almost in a whisper; and at the conclusion Clodomir heaved a long-drawn sigh, and lifted the cap from his head to breathe more freely; then turning to the Red Knight, he exclaimed—

“It must be the aged father of my Lady Blanche whom we have lost!—Well, well,” laughing convulsively, “no one can live for ever, and, God knows, the Sire de Loménie was no boy!”

He then paused to marshal his men, that they might present as goodly an appearance as possible; and the party then proceeded, the clangour of their trumpets all the while ringing through the valley, and answered by the joyous blast of the warders from the castle. The fall of the heavy drawbridge, as it descended with a loud clang, was next audible; and by this time they had drawn near enough to ascertain the truth of the Moor's statement, for the black banner, floating sullenly in the sluggish sum-

mer breeze, was distinctly visible to all. The eyes of the whole party were riveted in doubt and amazement to the direful signal, when suddenly the light laugh of the young Baron himself broke the stillness. "I have it now! I have it now!" exclaimed he, clapping his hands; "Robin, it is thyself who art mourned at the Castle; seest thou not the bleeding heart which surmounts the banner-staff? It is yonder dunder-headed henchman, whom we lost at Roncevalles, who hath conveyed the news of thy death. All hail to thee, Robin! by Saint Denis! thou art the first dead man who ever guided his steed over the drawbridge of La Morlaye!"

This little incident, although trifling in itself, was in those days of superstition considered an omen of direful import, and was remembered with fear and trembling long after the more important events of the day were forgotten.

It would be useless to attempt to pourtray the feelings of the youthful Baron and the Lady Blanche when they again met after their long separation, nor the rapture of delight with which he gazed on his own fair child, nor the fond pride which swelled the heart of the young mother as she pointed out the personal graces of the lovely boy ; suffice it to say, that their meeting was such as to cause the eyes of all, excepting those of the Red Knight, to swim in tears, while the tender-hearted Moor, albeit of a race styled barbarous by the fierce and haughty Gauls, hid his face in the mane of his palfrey and sobbed aloud.

CHAPTER II.

WHO can describe the wonder and delight of all the bold retainers of La Morlaye at their Lord's return? Nothing but wassail and merriment was now heard within the walls of the Castle, where all had of late been sorrow and mourning. The joyful news spread quickly among the Chatelains of the forest, and brought them, with their ladies and followers, to congratulate the Baron on his happy escape from danger. Fête succeeded to fête, and banquet to banquet, in rapid succession; and nothing but jousting, and feasting, and dancing, occupied

every hour of the day. Every thing noble and gay was gathered at La Morlaye, and every countenance wore a joyous aspect.

In the midst of all this revelry the Moor alone wandered silent and dejected about the Castle, heedless of the mirth around him, and unnoticed by any, save a few gaping domestics, to whom his splendid costume, and the jewels with which he was adorned, were objects of wonder and admiration ; for all were too much occupied by their own amusement to feel pity for the sorrows of one whom they regarded in the light of a captured enemy, to remain with them only until sufficient ransom should be offered for his release. Upon his first arrival at the Castle, the Baron had allotted him a small apartment looking into the court-yard below, instead of the dungeon to which, as a prisoner of war, he would have been consigned, had it not been for the tender feelings excited in Clodomir's bosom by

the extreme youth and deep dejection of the captive. When the inmates of the Castle were assembled in the banqueting-hall, the lonely prisoner would leave his solitary chamber to walk in the now deserted court-yard, and would often sigh as the sounds of laughter and merriment reached his ear from within. Here he would spend his time in gazing wistfully through the wicket of the warder's lodge at the road by which he had been led a prisoner to La Morlaye, and would sometimes start, and look as in eager hope, if perchance a traveller or huntsman issued from the dark forest beyond, as though he expected the arrival of some one for whom he had long been watching ; but as they drew near, would turn away, heartsickened and disappointed, to his own chamber, there to mourn the overthrow of his hopes for that day, and again to watch on the morrow.

He had one day descended, as was his cus-

tom, upon hearing the well-known signal that summoned the guests to the banquet, and had scarcely taken his wonted station at the wicket, ere he descried two Knights returning from the chase, one of whom he instantly recognised as the Red Knight, who had been his fellow-traveller, the other was La Morlaye. He had not beheld Clodomir even once since they had arrived together at the Castle ; and he involuntarily paused longer than he was wont, to gaze on his old companion, who he had so fondly hoped would prove a friend. But no ; La Morlaye had forgotten him—La Morlaye, who had tried by every gentle art to win his confidence during their long and tedious journey, had left him to solitude and neglect, now that he had reached his own happy home, where the meanest hind was of more value in his eyes than the unransomed prisoner. He had so long remained thus, musing on the fallacy of the hope he

had once entertained, of having secured at least one friend in his captivity, that the iron boots of the hunters had sounded on the drawbridge before he was aware of their near approach. He instantly darted across the court-yard, and was in his chamber ere the warder's challenge reached his ear ; but he could distinguish every word of the conversation between the two Knights, as they drew near to the hall-door of the Castle.

“ I tell thee, I saw his face at the wicket,” said the Red Knight, as if in continuation of some argument with Clodomir.

“ If thou didst, thou hast seen a comely one,” returned the Baron, in no very gracious mood. “ By Saint Denis ! Robin, my conscience upbraideth me with sore neglect towards yonder luckless prisoner ; it is strange that I should thus have forgotten him. Poor youth ! how lone he must have been !” looking upwards as he spoke to the iron grating of the chamber. It is sad

to be a captive so young, and in a foreign land ; it is a chance that may happen to all ; and who knows but one day my own blooming boy may have to seek that mercy from others, which——”

The Red Knight started, and hastily interrupting the Baron,

“ If thou hadst taken my advice, yonder Moor would not now be a prisoner at La Morlaye,” said he, significantly touching the hilt of his dagger.

“ Out on thy policy, Robin !” returned Clodomir angrily ; “ methinks, truly, the Moorish javelins have robbed thee of all kindly feeling ; besides, he may be ransomed ; and return again to his own land, and be happy once more, and——”

“ Ransomed !” rejoined Robert sneeringly, “ I tell thee it is small ransom thou wilt ever see for the lad.”

“ Well, well, no matter,” said La Morlaye, “ whatever it be, it is thine, according to my promise, when thou didst agree to spare his life. And even if he be not ransomed, he shall become my own page ; thou seest the boy is of gentle blood ; the jewels with which he is covered prove his rank, and it were not seemly that he should be made to herd with the slaves of the household.”

At this moment a servant announced that the guests awaited their presence.

“ Enter, Robin,” said Clodomir, “ thou must do the honours till I come ; I go to seek the Moor.”

“ Do as ye list,” replied Robert, “ but, if thou followest my counsel, thou wilt place no confidence in a Moor—an infidel, and one who is, moreover, an enemy to thy race.”

“ Thou hast forgotten,” said Clodomir, almost laughing, “ the service he rendered us on yonder hill.”

“And thou the omen,” returned the Red Knight, in a solemn voice; and pointing to the banners on the towers of the castle, which now fluttered gaily in all the gaudiness of azure and white. With these words he turned aside, and Clodomir ascended the dark and narrow stair, wondering that Robert could suspect treachery in one so guileless as the Moor appeared to be.

His conscience smote him as he entered the chamber, where the prisoner sat silent and solitary, and where he had so long remained neglected and unheeded by all.

“Come hither, boy,” said he, heartily vexed with his own forgetfulness. “In truth, I am grieved not to have remembered thee; I fear me, that while mourning in thy loneliness, thou hast called me heedless and ungenerous. Say, is it not so, El Adhel?”

The Moor did not answer, but his soft dark eye filled with tears at this unexpected kind-

ness, and he suffered the Baron to take his passive hand and lead him from the chamber. Not a word was spoken by either, until they had reached the door of the banqueting-hall, and then Clodomir turned, and said to the captive,

“Thou wilt wait at my chair, El Adhel, and be ever near my person ; if it please thee, thou mayest become my confidential page. Poor boy !” he added, in a tone of deep feeling, as he gazed on his countenance, “care has already left traces on thy brow ; ’tis strange thy friends send not to redeem thee, thou art over young thus to be left to mope and pine alone.”

The look of pity with which these words were accompanied was answered by one of the deepest gratitude from the expressive eyes of the Moor ; and together, they entered the apartment.

All eyes were simultaneously turned towards the opening door, and the assembled guests arose

with one accord as the Lord of La Morlaye entered, followed by the prisoner, and walked to his seat at the head of the table. The Moor soon attracted the attention of all, and a murmur of admiration ran round the apartment; the ladies were enchanted by the surpassing beauty of his person, the Knights by the gorgeousness of his apparel; and curiosity to know his history soon became the prevailing feeling.

"We have tarried, my Lord," at length spoke the Lady Blanche, as the Baron courteously motioned to his guests to be seated.

"I feared reproach," he replied, bowing with gallantry, "and have brought my excuse." At the same time presenting the Moor to her notice. The soft blue eyes of the lady were instantly turned with surprise upon the Moor; and the Baron continued, "It is the Moorish captive of the turret chamber; thou seest 'twere hard for him to spend his

days far from the sweet influence of a lady's looks, and so I must even give him up to Raoul, my esquire, to instruct in all the duties of a page, that he may learn to grace our household. By Saint Denis! 'twere a fair appendage to our state, and one his Majesty himself will envy, when we appear at Court, seeing that Saracen prisoners are somewhat more rare in France than those from Saxony," glancing his eye in admiration over the beautiful form of the Moor as he spoke.

"Methinks my lady's bower were fitter for the boy, than either court or camp," drily remarked Red Robert, who sate by the side of Clodomir; "my lady's train were a lighter burthen for his arm to bear than my lord's buckler in the field, or even my lord's bugle in the chase. I speak not of sword or lance, those of course would not be trusted to a——"

He did not finish his sentence, for the Moor

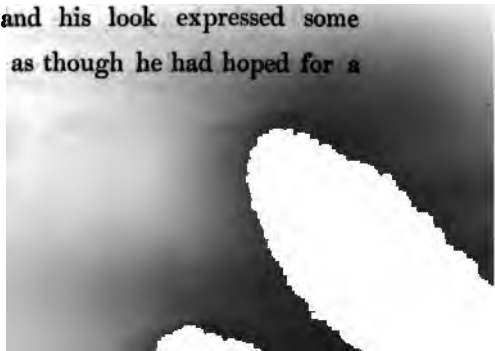
fixed on him a glance so dark and deadly as to cause even his proud eye to quail and tremble beneath it.

"Nay, nay," returned Clodomir, without heeding the change in the speaker's countenance, "I could answer with my life for the faith of this Moor. But, stay! let the boy choose for himself. El Adhel! answer truly; wouldst thou serve my lady or my lord?"

There was a pause. All appeared to await anxiously for the boy's answer, and many observed that Robert looked somewhat uneasy respecting it. At length the Page spoke, slowly, but distinctly, and without the least hesitation in his manner.

"May it please my Lord the Baron, it is my Lady I would rather serve."

There was a slight tinge visible on the cheek of the Baron, and his look expressed some disappointment, as though he had hoped for a



different reply; but quickly resuming his usual gaiety, he congratulated the Lady Blanche on the acquisition of a turbaned Saracen page, a distinction for which the Empress and her daughters had long sighed in vain, and in revenge of such privation, they did not fail, ever and anon, to remind the luckless Charlemagne of his defeat.

It were needless to repeat all the pleasant things that were said on this occasion, but certainly the most successful compliment was paid by the young Chevalier de Carmont, who remarked, that the fair lady of La Morlaye and her swarthy page would not fail to remind beholders of the old adage—

“ Laugh and be merry while ye may,
Night will and must follow the fairest day.”

After the banquet, the old minstrel of the Castle was called in, and diversified the amuse-

ments of the evening, by repeating some of those old legendary ballads, always relating to the daring exploits of the ancestors of the Lord of the domain, which were listened to with as much courtesy by the guests, as though they were entertaining, and with as much patience as though they were new.

“What thinkest thou of our Northern minstrelsy, El Adhel?” said Clodomir, turning with kindness to the youth, at the conclusion of one of these monotonous lays. “I fear me, thou findest it cold and dull, after the glowing Moorish ballads with which thou wert wont to greet our ears, when called upon to lighten the fatigue of our journey.”

At this question there was a general demand from the company, among whom the ladies were by no means the least urgent, to hear one of those far-famed Arabian lays, then so justly celebrated.

The request had been repeated many times, and still the Moor, perhaps from diffidence, hesitated to comply ; but when the sweet voice of the Lady Blanche mingled in entreaty with those of the rest of the party, he instantly advanced into the midst of the circle. It was necessary to wait for a few moments, while an attendant was despatched for the small Moorish kitar, which had accompanied the youth in his captivity, and been the sole companion of his lonely hours. This short pause was spent by all present in gazing in mute admiration on the wondrous beauty and tasteful costume of the prisoner. He stood before them, glowing with all the wild and sparkling graces of his race—a perfect specimen of Moorish beauty. The smooth sallow cheek and lip, together with the slight and boyish gracefulness of his person, bespoke early youth, while the thoughtful brow and soft melancholy of the dark eyes which it shaded, were such as belong to later

years. His complexion was of the clear olive tint peculiar to his clime, through which the deep carnation of youth and health was distinctly visible. Lips of the richest crimson, when closed, lent a lustre to the countenance, increased even to brilliancy by the snowy whiteness of the teeth which they revealed when parted. On his head he wore the high scarlet turban of the Moors, richly embroidered in gold, and profusely adorned with jewels. His dress, which consisted of a short white tunic reaching to the knee, was cut low at the neck, leaving the throat wholly bare, or only shaded by the raven curls which clustered in thick profusion over it. His waist was bound by an embroidered belt, through which was passed the small Moorish dagger, sparkling, as well as the cimiter that hung by his side, in all the blaze of jewels with which the weapons of the Arabs were so lavishly decorated.

The instrument being brought, he first struck

a few chords as if to gain confidence, and then began his lay. It was one of those legends of the valour and misfortunes of the bold Moorish chieftains, during their long and bloody wars with the Christians. His voice, which at first was low and soft, grew louder as he proceeded, until at last it rose sweet and clear in all the wild and varied richness of the minstrelsy of the South. The song was in the Arab language, which was familiar to few; but the passionate tones and expressive gestures of the singer were understood by all. It told the story of the three brave sons of a mighty Moorish chieftain, who stole by night from their father's castle to rescue the Saracen banner which had fallen into the hands of the enemy, and was planted in derision beneath the huge standard of the Christians, to grace the tent of their chief.

“ In the still silence of the bright moonlight

did the daring youths attain the midst of the enemy's camp. The banner is soon lowered, and in the hands of the valiant Malek, the eldest of the three; while Selim and Allomar trample the Christian standard in the dust. They then prepare to steal as silently out of the camp; but by this time the baying of the true bloodhounds has alarmed the soldiers, and in an instant the whole camp is awakened. Resistance is hopeless; they are surrounded on all sides; but the lion-hearted Malek, still grasping the banner, has cut his way gallantly through the enemy, and dashes from the midst, calling loudly on his brothers to follow. But they heed him not: an arrow has pierced the heart of the noble Selim, and the life-blood gushes in torrents from his side. Malek turns, as the despairing shriek of the youthful Aliomar rings in his ears; he sees the valiant Selim falling from his horse, and weltering in his blood!

The heart of the bold Moor stirs within him at the sight ; he resolves to turn back and rescue him, or die. But the faithful steed has borne his master through too many perils not to feel his danger now ; for the first time he refuses to obey his voice—he turns not—but, fleetier than the wind—fleetier than the arrows of the Christians, which now fall thick and fast around, he dashes down the valley, far beyond pursuit, nor once stops till he has reached the castle-gate. Malek still holds the fatal standard : —but where is the brave, the noble Selim ?—where the beautiful Allomar ? the loved of all—the youngest and the flower—the pride of his race, and the joy of his father's heart ! Alas ! he is borne away captive to the cold North to grace the triumph of the haughty Christian. O that he had died with Selim ! then, like him, would he sleep with the children of the Prophet, in the land that his fathers had conquered !”

The singer paused, and all awaited with intense interest the conclusion, but he did not proceed : the instrument dropped unheeded from his hand, and he burst into a passion of tears.

All present were moved, for it seemed as though it were his own sad story that he had been reciting ; and pity for his misfortunes now mingled with the admiration with which they had before regarded him.

“ Captivity is sad for all,” said Clodomir, first breaking silence ; “ but oh how sad for one so young ! Come hither, Clarion,” he continued, turning to the blooming boy who sat at his mother’s feet, gazing with childish wonder on the Moor. “ Pride of my heart, may I never miss thee from my side !” he exclaimed, imprinting a fond kiss on the forehead of the child.

“ Alas, poor youth !” sighed the Lady Blanche, as she gazed with tearful eyes on the lovely features of her own rosy infant, “ how must his mother mourn his loss !”

“ My heart inclines towards yonder Moor,” continued Clodomir; “ and albeit we should find him no mean ornament to La Morlaye, yet am I fain to own, it sorely grieveth me to hold in durance so youthful a captive. So if thou thinkest well, Robin, I will even despatch messengers to Spain and proclaim my prisoner; I doubt me not we shall get a heavy ransom, for my conscience much deceiveth me if he be not the son of one of the bold Saracen chiefs of whom he has sung to us just now; but in vain have I tried to win the secret from him, he does nothing but weep at the very mention of home and kindred. If it be as I imagine, then is thy fortune made, for thou knowest the fervent love that these Moors bear towards their children. Ha! what sayest thou? thinkest thou my plan a good one, cousin Robin?” There was no answer to this question; it was repeated: for the first time Clodomir

looked towards the seat which Robert had occupied, and, to his great astonishment, found it vacant. All were equally astonished, for such had been the intense interest excited by the ballad of the Moor that none had noticed his departure; but the company knowing his aversion to the frivolous entertainment of music, judged that, overcome by fatigue, he had sought his chamber for the night; and when Clodomir, expressing surprise that his cousin had summoned no groom to attend him, was informed that such was not his custom, he felt convinced that he had indeed retired to rest; and contented with this assurance, dismissed the subject altogether from his mind.

CHAPTER III.

ROBERT the Red, the cousin of Clodomir, and by many years his senior, had succeeded in gaining a complete ascendancy over him, which the open, unsuspecting nature of the Baron, rendered an easy task to one so crafty and deceitful. Notwithstanding this, it was believed by many, that Robert sincerely loved his cousin; and the common saying among La Morlaye's followers was, that the Baron had but one fault, his love for Robert; while Robert had but one virtue, his love for Clodomir. In his childhood, bred up by his uncle, the father

of Clodomir, who had long despaired of having an heir of his own name to inherit his title, he had suddenly seen all his hopes overthrown by the death of the Baroness; his uncle's subsequent marriage with a young and beautiful lady, and the birth of Clodomir, determined him, young as he then was, to seek his fortune elsewhere, and, in disappointment and disgust, he quitted the Castle. He did not revisit his home for many years, during which he had gained a high name for prudence and bravery; and when at length he did return, he found his kind uncle fast sinking into the grave, and Clodomir, a youth on the verge of manhood. A short time before his death, the aged Baron summoned his nephew to his bed-side, and recalling all that he had once done for him, when he was young and helpless, engaged him, as he possessed any feeling of gratitude, to stay at the Castle and watch over Clodomir until he

had arrived at man's estate, and no longer needed his care. The promise was given, and scrupulously fulfilled; and during the few years the cousins resided together, the loving heart of Clodomir clung with the most devoted attachment to Robert. But soon the gloomy and discontented spirit of the latter made him regard with scorn the idea of living, as it were, in dependence upon his cousin; and when the term of his guardianship had expired, in spite of the earnest entreaty of Clodomir to stay and share his home and fortune, he again took his departure, and followed the Emperor Charlemagne in his expedition into Saxony.

Without followers, for he was too poor to maintain a retinue—without friends, for the pride and reserve of his character had alienated the hearts of all his comrades—finally, without any external sign of rank, he again joined the

army, resolving in that last struggle to win fame and fortune, or die. His daring bravery soon procured for him the notice of the Emperor, and for a short time it was believed that he was on the high road to wealth and honour. But Charlemagne, although brave as a lion, was humane and generous, and could not admit to his friendship one whose ferocity would ever tarnish the lustre of his brightest deeds.

It was at the grand encounter with the brave Saxons, near Paderborn, that Robert most distinguished himself, and helped to turn the fortunes of the day. For a time the Saxons had the advantage, owing to the exertions of their leader, the renowned Witikind the Great, and his kinsman Otho, whose gigantic form and desperate bravery spread terror and confusion wheresoever he appeared. All turned and fled in dismay at the very sight of his enormous two-edged sword, and the bravest hearts shrank

from an encounter with the arm that wielded it. "Where is the dauntless spirit of my once valiant knights?" cried Charlemagne in despair, as the panic spread through his army: "Will none turn and fight the Saxon? Will ye fly thus, while there is hope of victory?" At this moment a knight was seen to issue from the *mêlée*, and ride fiercely towards Otho. His visor was close barred, but all knew it to be "Robert the Homeless," as he was then called, by the snow-white scarf and plume which he wore—the never-failing tokens of his house. Otho fought on foot; and, scorning to take advantage of his enemy, Robert instantly dismounting, threw down his gauntlet at the giant's feet. The latter stooped and took it up. "Wodin for Saxony!" cried Witikind—"Saint Denis pour la France!" shouted Charlemagne, and the combat began, both armies pausing to witness the struggle. Destruction seemed inevit-

able for Robert ; for, at the first onset, the trusty broadsword, which he had borne through so many conflicts, was shivered in pieces by one blow from that of his opponent. Already was the huge weapon of the Saxon lifted to deal the fatal blow, when a sudden impulse of generosity caused him to pause, and, to the astonishment of all, the sword flew harmless over the head of Robert, and again they met on equal ground ! For a while the combat now seemed doubtful ; the superior address and agility of Robert enabling him to ward off the heavy ill-directed blows of his antagonist's dagger, while the inexhaustible strength of Otho seemed likely at last to overwhelm him. But fortune soon favoured the Christian ; for in the heat of passion, Otho the Giant, losing sight of prudence, rushed blindly on his enemy with such violence, that his foot slipped, and his gigantic form fell prostrate to the earth.

In the next moment Robert's knee was on his bosom, and his dagger upraised. "Spare him!" cried Witikind, "spare him, O Christian!—a king's ransom shall be thine but to spare him!"—"Take not his life!" cried the generous Charlemagne; "remember his mercy to thee." But it was too late; the dagger had already entered into his heart, and Robert was gazing with looks of triumph and hatred on the dying struggles of his foe. "I die, but yield not!" were the last words of the haughty Saxon; and Robert, loosening the snowy scarf from his armour, drenched it in the crimson gore that gushed in torrents from his side, then holding it up for a moment in triumph, replaced it, still warm with the life-blood of his enemy, exclaiming, as he tied the noose, "Now none will dispute these colours, for none else can wear them." The bleeding-heart, with the dying words of Otho, from that moment graced his

shield, and Robert the Red, or the Red-handed Robert, were the epithets by which he was ever after distinguished.

Many thought that this event would be the making of the champion's fortune ; but it was not so : the noble heart of Charlemagne revolted at the ferocity and ingratitude displayed in this exploit, and an unaccountable feeling of distrust and aversion took possession of his mind respecting him. At the return of the victorious army into France, Robert presented himself at Court ; but his reception there was by no means flattering. Whether it was owing to this feeling of personal dislike, or that his presence and the colours which he wore recalled to his Sovereign's mind the disgraceful massacre of Paderborn, which forms so dark a spot on the bright annals of his reign, is uncertain. There were some in whose eyes this apparent injustice on the part of the Emperor was sufficient excuse

for the lawlessness of the champion's life while at Court ; but his conduct only tended to increase the aversion of the monarch towards him, and this at length became so marked, as to induce the Red Knight again to seek the retirement of La Morlaye. Here fresh cause of disappointment and vexation awaited him. Clodomir received him, indeed, with open arms, and with the same affection as ever ; but was no longer the fond, confiding youth, who made his guardian's will his law ; he found him married, and a father, and, to Robert's great chagrin and annoyance, presenting his beautiful wife and child, as the greatest novelties to be seen at La Morlaye. This last event seemed to be the climax to his ill fortune, and turned to gloom and discontent what little good remained in his disposition. Although he endeavoured to the utmost to conceal his feelings, it could not escape the jealous eye of the fond mother, that

herself and child were objects of his aversion, and an indescribable foreboding that he would one day ruin their happiness, took possession of her soul. Even Clodomir, whose heart, although now divided in its affection, still preserved all its fond regard for Robert, could not help perceiving the change in his character, but attributed it to the ingratitude of Charlemagne in not rewarding his services.

With the followers of La Morlaye he was the object of universal hatred, for all remembered the haughty arrogance of his manner towards them, when he had hoped to become their master. It cannot, then, be matter of astonishment that the announcement from Clodomir to his vassals, that Robert was to remain, and be second to none but himself at the castle, was received with regret, as the Knight himself, together with Hybelin his esquire, were objects of suspicion and dislike to

them all, and an event soon occurred which greatly tended to keep alive this feeling.

A short time after his first arrival at La Morlaye, the trusty band, which had never known defeat, were surprised by their ancient enemies, the robbers of the forest, and narrowly escaped being taken prisoners. From the secrecy which had been observed, it was universally agreed that a traitor must lurk among them, or their ambush could not have been discovered, and whisperings were soon afloat in the castle, that either Hybelin the esquire, or his master, whom he so much resembled, must be in league with the robbers. Clodomir laughed to scorn the idea of his own brave cousin turning traitor; he who had so often shared his hard-earned victories over the very enemies whom he was now accused of favouring; but yet he could not disguise from himself that it was Hybelin who had led the party, and Robert who had planned it; and now

and then a slight suspicion would cross his mind, when he reflected with what vehemence he had urged him not to hunt that day, and the coolness with which he had listened to the details of their defeat ; and it must be confessed, that when the summons came to join the Emperor in Spain, it was a secret relief to his fears that Robert was in all honour bound to accompany him. But the long journey by his side, the companionship in arms, the participation of dangers and fatigue, soon restored his unbounded love for his cousin ; it seemed, indeed, as though he wished to make amends for having once doubted his faith ; and when, after the battle, Hybelin had deserted his wounded master, the generous Clodomir, deferring his return to those who were dearer than life itself, lingered by his sick couch, and attended him with unwearied patience, till sufficiently recovered to be the companion of his journey.

This cruel desertion on the part of the esquire must have weighed heavily on the mind of the Red Knight, for the slightest allusion to it would cause his brow to darken, and his resentment to burst forth in threats and execrations, which all who knew his temperament were by no means eager to encounter. The kind heart of the Baron bled for his cousin; he had never met with a single instance of treachery or ingratitude even among the meanest of his vassals, and this open desertion of an esquire, one holding the rank of a gentleman, and looking forward to become a knight, almost exceeded his powers of belief. True it was, that from the first he had entertained an invincible dislike to Hybelin; his ruffian-like demeanour, and the sulkiness with which he obeyed his master's commands, disgusted him, who had always been served with cheerfulness and alacrity by the adoring followers of his father's house.

During the time the castle was filled with guests, the Red Knight's dejection was not so apparent; but when these had all departed, and sounds of merriment were no longer heard within its walls, his gloomy fits of abstraction became so frequent as to excite Clodomir's wonder at the cause. Even the chase, which had once been his delight — and his fondness for it had formed one of the kindred ties which bound him to his cousin — seemed no longer to afford him pleasure: he followed it, it is true, but to Clodomir it was evident that his mind was ill at ease; he had lost, too, the reckless daring in the sport which had formerly distinguished him as among the boldest huntsmen of the forest; there were even certain days on which no persuasion could induce him to quit the castle, and on these occasions Clodomir, always vexed, and sometimes even expressing displeasure, would hunt accompanied only by his own esquire and retinue.

One day, after having vainly solicited his cousin to be of the party, the Baron descended to the court-yard, with the determination of bringing home trophies of a glorious day's chase. It was a fine clear October morning, and both steeds and riders seemed equally eager for the sport, while the glad baying of the hounds on being loosed from their couples proclaimed that they too took share in the general excitement. The Lady Blanche stood at the window of her chamber to gaze on the goodly train of huntsmen, until, one by one, they had entered the forest, and were lost to sight. Yet still she lingered there, long after the heavy gates were closed, and all was silent once more within the walls of the castle, while the lowing of the kine, or the distant echo of the huntsman's bugle were the only sounds that met the ear from without. "It is strange," at length she said, after musing some time, to Clotilde, her bower-woman, who, together with the Moor-

ish page, remained standing in the apartment,

“it is passing strange that our cousin Robert should stay in the castle to mope and pine like a sickly maiden on so fair a day.”

“Ay, my Lady,” returned Clotilde, “in truth there is much that savours of mystery in yonder Knight. How can he like to remain shut up in that lonely tower the whole day long, with nobody in the world to speak to from morn to night?”

“Perhaps,” said the Lady Blanche laughing, “he has better employment than talking; thou knowest he is of a solid mind, and has ever found amusement in his own reflections, preferring them greatly to those of others.”

At this moment a clatter of horses’ hoofs was heard in the court-yard, and both the lady and her attendants bent forward to catch a glimpse of the rider. It was the steed of the Red

Knight which a groom was leading from the outer court, and presently Robert himself, clad in his suit of jet-black armour, came out, and hastily mounting in silence, rode towards the gate. Curiosity for a few moments kept all mute; but the Lady Blanche at length broke silence, by exclaiming, in a tone of surprise, while she yet gazed upon the Knight, "Robert has no doubt changed his purpose, he will join my Lord in the chase; the fair weather is more than he could resist; it has tempted him abroad at last. He is far behind the huntsmen, but may yet overtake them, for, excepting Clodomir, he has ever been deemed the swiftest rider of them all."

"In truth, my Lady," returned Clotilde, "I should laugh right heartily were he to meet them already returning and bearing the boar's head in triumph. Thinkest thou he will ever overtake the huntsmen, El Adhel?"

"Never!" replied the Moor, in a tone of voice that made both his hearers start and look towards the speaker.

"Thou dost not think he is bent elsewhere than to the chase?" said the Lady Blanche, turning deadly pale, and fixing her eyes earnestly upon his countenance.

"He beareth no hunting-spear, my Lady," said the page; "and is it usual for the followers of my Lord to hunt in armour?"

"Thou sayest true," returned the Lady, evidently in great distress, her worst suspicions reviving. "Oh, would to Heaven Clodomir were now safe within the castle!"

"Be not alarmed, my Lady," said the Moor, somewhat moved by her agitation, "you see he goeth unarmed, bearing neither sword, nor lance, nor shield; neither doth he—"

He paused, for he discovered that the Red Knight was not quite unarmed, as at that very

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moment three distinct knocks were heard on the outer gate, and the page's quick eye could discern that they came from the hilt of his dagger, which he immediately afterwards replaced in his belt. He knew the dagger well; it had been the gift of the Emperor, and was ornamented by a ruby of prodigious size and inestimable value, which flashed and sparkled in the sun, as the hilt was struck against the gate; but he did not mention the circumstance, fearing to increase the agitation of the Lady Blanche. By this time the gates were opened, Robert had passed through, and the lady, after gazing for some time at his retiring form, was heard to exclaim joyfully,—“ Ah ! he followeth the track of the huntsmen : see, Clotilde ! he taketh the very path by which my Lord disappeared this morning.”

“ It is well—it is well !” said the Moor to himself, when, as if satisfied with this convic-

tion, she had retired from the casement ; “ but my mind sore misgiveth me if he be not bent on other game to-day.”

The rest of the morning was spent in feverish anxiety by the Lady of La Morlaye ; a certain presentiment of evil seemed to hang over her, which she felt nothing but her lord's return could dissipate ; and neglecting her usual avocations she wandered restlessly about the castle, anxiously watching and listening for the first sign that might indicate the return of the huntsmen. Hour after hour passed away, and yet all was silent. At noon the heavy bell of the castle flung its sound as usual far and wide through the valley, but was answered by no merry peal from Clodomir's bugle, to show that he heard and welcomed the signal. Noon passed away—evening was approaching—and yet all continued still as death, until at length, unable longer to control her impatience, the Lady

Blanche herself had descended to the court-yard, which she was pacing to and fro in a state of agitation almost amounting to agony. She had brought the child thither, for at such a time she would not lose sight of him for a moment; and the young Moor, who had grown doatingly fond of the boy, in order to beguile the time, had saddled his palfrey, and, with the child mounted on its back, was leading it up and down the court-yard, to the great delight of the infant horseman, whose bursts of childish laughter were the only sounds that broke the silence.

Thus did the hours pass tediously away till near sunset, when the old seneschal, seeing the distress of the lady, after having vainly offered consolation, proposed despatching messengers to some of the neighbouring Barons, to request their assistance in this emergency. Accordingly couriers were sent forth upon the only steeds that remained in the stables, and were scarcely out of sight ere the joyous blast was

heard from the warder's tower which announced the approach of friends. All rushed in eager hope to the gateway — a Knight was descried advancing rapidly towards the castle, and in another moment Robert the Red himself galloped over the drawbridge.

He appeared to have ridden hard, for his goodly steed was covered with foam, and he himself was evidently in the greatest agitation.

“Why stand ye loitering here, gaping fools?” said he, in a voice of thunder, to the trembling group which had gathered round him as he dismounted.

“Nay, Sir Knight,” interposed the Lady Blanche, “it is but natural that myself and household should feel some anxiety to hear that which you doubtless have to tell us concerning the long delay of our lord.”

The Knight gazed earnestly at her without replying.

“Speak,” she continued, in breathless alarm ;

“Speak!—I can bear to hear the worst—he is dead!—ye have fought!—the robbers have murdered him!”

Robert wiped the perspiration from his brow, and visibly struggled hard to appear calm.

“Be not alarmed, I beseech you, lady,” he replied; “no harm has befallen my brave cousin, that I can safely affirm, for I saw him but now leading his men homeward. I had followed hard all day, but without success, and fearing his merry jests on baffled huntsmen, hoped to escape to my own chamber ere he should arrive.”

The Lady Blanche gazed on the Knight as though she would have read his inmost soul. At length she spoke, after a few moments’ pause,

“Robert! it is in vain thou wouldst seek to deceive me. Clodomir is murdered! Oh,

God!" she exclaimed, with a faint shriek, as he raised his arm as if to call Heaven to witness the truth of what he had said, "there is blood upon thy hand! — thou knowest he is murdered!"

"On my honour what I have spoken is true!" returned Robert somewhat angrily; "this blood is mine," showing a deep gaping wound in his wrist; "a mere scratch, gained in tearing asunder the tangled bushes that my steed might pass through. By my soul, it is true!" he continued more vehemently, as his eye met the incredulous gaze of the Lady Blanche; "send but to the top of the hill, and you will see that I have told no lie."

With these words he turned indignantly away, and his retreating footstep was soon after heard ascending the staircase which led to his own chamber.

The Lady paused for a moment after his

departure, but she did not hesitate long, for presently turning to the group of wondering vassals, "Saddle my good Spanish jennet," said she in a resolute tone. "Clotilde, bring the boy, and come with me."

"You will not surely go yourself, my Lady?" said the seneschal, in perfect affright. "I beseech you let some of our young men ride to the top of the hill; they will be quickly back—indeed, indeed they will, my gracious Lady."

"Alas! good Marcel, there are no steeds in the stables, and my impatience would ill brook a foot's pace," was the Lady's answer. "Fear not, good friends, I will keep in sight; but I pray you let none leave the castle to follow me; we can but ill afford to lose even one faithful friend, and who knows how soon ye may all be needed?"

The palfreys were quickly caparisoned, and to the grief of all the faithful retainers, the Lady

Blanche mounted, and followed by Clotilde, bearing the child, prepared to leave the castle. In vain did they urge her stay, and to old Marcel's entreaty, that she would leave the child, she replied angrily,

“No, no, I go not without the boy; think not that there is danger for him; the heir of La Morlaye has but one enemy, and—” she added, as if to herself, “thank Heaven! we have him safe within the castle.”

The concluding words were unheard, but all knew to whom she alluded as the one enemy; for in the agitation in which the day had been passed, she had given breath to all her suspicions concerning Robert, which caused the old man to say when she had passed out into the valley,

“Now, for a kingdom, if my Lord be not returning, would I not be yonder Red-handed Robert, for it is plain our own noble lady has all the spirit of her father.”

“ Ay, ay,” returned the warder; “ and her arrow has struck the right quarry, or I am sore mistaken.”

The whole of the vassals now crowded round the gateway, to watch the Lady of La Morlaye, as she wound up the hill with her attendant. It was not unusual for her thus to ride to meet her Lord on his return from the hunt, and the excitement of her feelings preventing her now from experiencing alarm, she boldly advanced, eager to catch the first glimpse of the Baron's tall lance issuing from among the trees. Very different were the feelings of Clotilde: the sun had just set; the cold grey mist peculiar to the evenings of autumn veiled every object in shadow, and her affrighted imagination shrinking from a closer approach to the gloomy forest, began assiduously to devise some plan to induce her Lady to return. Accordingly, she suddenly recollected that a

raven had perched that morning upon the tall watch-tower, and had moreover croaked three successive times ; every one knew that this had been considered an evil omen from time immemorial, and there was no guessing what might happen if they advanced much farther. Finding this of no avail, she changed her ground, and began affectionately to hope that her young Lord, Sir Clarion, would not suffer from the cold, which she suddenly discovered was so intense, that even grown people might have cause to regret having been exposed to it.

To all this specious reasoning, the Lady Blanche only replied sharply, that those who bore the name of La Morlaye were born to greater sufferings than the cool night breeze could inflict ; and as for the omen, that must have been fulfilled ere this, for surely they had experienced evil enough that day.

“ But, my Lady,” said Clotilde

getting dack ; and if there were danger, how could we escape? Hist, my Lady ! did you hear nothing moving, down yonder among the fern? Holy Virgin !” she continued, looking back with a wistful glance, “ how far we are from the castle !”

“ Away ! with thy silly fears, Clotilde,” said the Lady ; “ it was some poor frightened hare, almost as timid as thyself ; it is yet quite daylight, and thou knowest my white dress must be distinctly visible to the faithful friends who are watching from the gateway. In truth, thou hast no more courage than a—”

She was here interrupted by a piercing shriek from Clotilde, and her terror may be conceived, when upon turning she saw the damsel lying senseless on the grass, and her beloved, her beautiful boy, struggling in the grasp of a ruffian, wearing the hated costume of the forest robbers. She uttered no cry, she

paused not even to think, but dismounted quick as lightning, and darting to his side, clasped the child with almost superhuman strength. But the iron arm of the ruffian relaxed not its hold.

“Take him not away,” shrieked the Lady, in all the wildness of despair; “take him not away! the child is mine! you will not tear him from me.”

“I know that,” replied the robber; “and I were a fool to let so rich a prize escape.”

A thrill of horror ran through the veins of the Lady Blanche; for she recognised the voice of the traitor Hybelin, and dared not hope for mercy. The ruffian gently loosed the child from her grasp, and unable longer to support herself, she sank on her knees before him.

“In mercy take him not away!” she exclaimed imploringly, as he prepared to move. “Hy-

belin, it is the Lady of La Morlaye, who kneels low at thy feet to beg mercy for her only child !”

The robber was silent, and thus encouraged to hope, the Lady continued in heart-rending accents, while clasping her hands she gazed upwards into his face.

“ I know thou wilt give me back the child ; nay, grasp him not thus tightly ; he is not used to so rude a touch. I pray thee, Hybelin, release him, and thy master shall pardon thee ; I will sue, and he will not refuse.”

The ruffian laughed loud in derision.

“ In truth, his pardon were little worth. I quit not my prize for so mean a ransom.” With these words he tore himself away and made towards the forest.

“ He flies, he flies !” cried the Lady Blanche in tones of despair, “ he flies, and with the child ! Oh, God ! is there no one near to help me ?”

She looked towards the castle. The faithful vassals had rushed out at the first shriek of Clotilde; but the whole scene had passed so rapidly, that they were even now far distant. The screams of the child were heard fainter and fainter as the robber fled with him into the dark wood; and she well knew, when once there, how fruitless would be the search. At that moment a slight rustling noise was heard behind her, and on looking up, she just caught the last glimpse of the Moor already at the top of the hill, and entering the forest.

“Poor youth!” said she faintly, “he rusheth on destruction! Alas, alas! it is not in human power now to save the boy.”

She sank almost lifeless on the greensward, and her fainting form was borne to the castle by a few of the vassals, while the rest dispersed in

what they dared not hope would prove a successful search after the robber.

Meanwhile the Moor, guided alone by the screams of the child, dashed fearlessly through brake and briar after the lawless ruffian who was bearing him away, and quickly coming in sight of the object of pursuit, boldly drew his cimeter.

In vain did the robber endeavour to elude his pursuer, by plunging into the thickest part of the wood : unlike the heavy war-horses of the Christians, the little Arabian which El Adhel mounted had been trained to this kind of warfare ; the passage forced by the ruffian through the bushes was always sufficient for the Moor to follow. The former turned and raised his dagger. In an instant it flew from his hand, as if by magic, and hung glittering over his own head in that of his youthful opponent ; and at length, exas-

perated by the attacks of his puny enemy, the robber dropped the child to draw his sword. This was what the Moor expected : quick as lightning he caught him up, and long ere the huge weapon, which at one blow would have crushed his own slight frame to atoms, was well out of its scabbard, he was far beyond its reach, with the heir of La Morlaye on the saddle before him.

Rage, for a moment, kept the robber riveted to the spot. "In truth," said he, as he gazed at his rapid flight, "if I had not known it was the Baron's Moorish prisoner, I verily should have thought him some dark-visaged imp of the forest, so like a flying-devil doth he gallop down the valley ; and—but I'll after him ; it is but taking the short cut through the Friar's-path, and I may catch him ere he can reach the castle. Curse the child ! I care not, so he but restore the dagger ! He has baffled

me this once, but it will go hard if I master him not when we again meet, hand to hand." Thus saying, he turned to follow the Friar's path, in the hope of soon regaining the Moor; but had not proceeded far, when the well-known war-note of La Morlaye rang in his ears, and on looking back, he perceived the Baron at the head of his followers advancing in the same direction. Inwardly blessing the friendly bugle which had thus saved him from being made prisoner, the robber crept among the under-wood, and thus escaped observation.

CHAPTER IV

To any common observer, it would have appeared that the Lord of La Morlaye had been absent on some long and perilous journey, by the shouts and acclamations with which he was greeted on his arrival at the castle. The surprise was great to see him return without trophies of the chase, and still greater to witness the boisterous gaiety with which the whole party rattled into the court-yard.

"Here! quick, knaves!" cried the Baron

as he dismounted, "see that our steeds be carefully 'tended, we shall want them betimes to-morrow." The grooms obeyed his orders in silence, which seemed to excite his surprise. "I know ye feared some evil chance had happened to your Lord, by his tarrying so late," he continued, glancing round at the affrighted countenances of those whom he addressed, which still bore traces of the recent alarm they had undergone; "but, 'fore God! shake off those dismal looks, or ye shall not hear a word of the joyful news we have to tell ye! News, ye faithful varlets!" he proceeded, laughing and rubbing his hands with glee, "news that will make all your fond hearts beat for joy, as now doth your master's!" At this moment Robert advanced from the hall-door to greet the Baron on his arrival. "Robin!" exclaimed the latter gaily, "if I tell thee all that hath befallen me this day, thou wilt go and hang thyself in sheer despite! Did

I not tell thee I would cure thee of thy stay-at-home humours? Verily!—but let us to the banquet, and over a good bumper of Rhenish will I unfold my secret: mine is now the stomach of a hungry hunter; and albeit there be no boar's-head to grace the feast, yet, methinks, the fame of the wolf's-head will be increased, in no small degree, by this day's chase!"

This good humour was, however, a little damped by the absence of the Lady Blanche, who had sent an excuse by the Moorish page, pleading indisposition, as the cause of her non-attendance; for none had yet dared to inform him of the desperate attempt to carry off his son, each dreading to bear the first brunt of his resentment.

After having done ample justice to the good cheer before him, the Baron proceeded to satisfy the well-feigned curiosity of his cousin respecting the day's adventure. The secret

was briefly this: "In pursuing a fine boat which had been started early in the day, the party had been led into the deepest recesses of the forest, but were amply repaid for this, by what had long been the object of Clodomir's ambition—the discovery of the hiding-place of the robbers. They had surprised them in the midst of some grand debate, as they were all assembled; and, being unprepared for defence, they had dispersed in confusion and dismay, to the remote and solitary glades of the wood, inaccessible to the steeds of their pursuers."

"And now," proceeded the Baron, laughing, "there remains but to wish thee joy, Robin; of a truth, thou hast an able representative among these worthy forest knights, and one, moreover, who is likely to prove no mean rival, if his skill in fighting be but equal to his skill in fleeing! Hadst thou but seen how the knave scampered! Wouldst believe, Robin? I

sent an arrow after the flying varlet, but it did but hit him slightly, thanks to his good steed ! for thou must know, my Lord, forsooth, was mounted, while his companions were fain to seek the first hiding-place, as fast as their own legs would bear them, and so escaped, where our chargers could not follow, leaving our runaway Knight to bear the whole heat of our pursuit. Once or twice we had wellnigh entrapped him, but by dint of turning and doubling he succeeded in evading us. But grieve not; he has not rode beyond our reach. I warrant me to-morrow's sun shall see the scarlet plumes of the false Knight laid low enough, together with the fool's head that bears them. But I leave him to thee, Robin; it is meet thou shouldst have the punishing of the traitor who affects to ape thy bearing, in all, be it spoken; but the manner in which thou art wont to greet thy foes."

Robert trembled ; his lip quivered, and, to hide his emotion, he seized the huge goblet which stood by his side, and drained it to the last drop. It might be indignation,—it might be the fixed, unshrinking gaze which the Moor, who stood behind the vacant chair of his mistress, had fastened upon him from the beginning of this speech ; but when the cup was replaced, Robert had in some measure regained composure, and boldly appearing to be enraged at this account, inquired in a sarcastic tone where he would be most likely to encounter this doughty Knight.

“ We chased him to the very verge of the forest,” replied the Baron ; “ he lurketh no doubt in its outskirts, for his beast must be too weary to bear him back. But to-morrow he is ours, Robin ! here let us pledge to the man who shall deal the death-blow to yonder craven, who presumeth to mimic the bearing of so valiant a Knight as Robert the Red !”

Robert drank the toast, but shuddered as his eye fell on the Moor, whose expressive gaze seemed to read his inmost soul. Unawed by the ferocious glance which he directed towards him, the dark eyes of the youth remained riveted on his countenance during the rest of the banquet; and when at a late hour the Baron and his cousin rose to leave the hall, and the page stood to watch them depart, "It is well," said he to himself, "the generous soul of the Baron he may deceive, but me he cannot; his coward eye quails beneath the steady gaze of mine; even that to me were proof sufficient of his treachery. But, Allah be praised! I have a proof which must convince the Baron himself, if he be not indeed bewitched. I know well I shall incur my Lord's displeasure to accuse him, but who would not brook it for the sake of my Lady and the child? So may the false traitor meet with his just reward!"

Nothing could equal the paroxysm of rage

to which the Baron gave way when he heard from the lips of the Lady Blanche of the daring attempt made by the robber to carry off his darling child; and he was proportionally grateful to the Moor who had saved the boy from captivity, or perhaps even death, by his timely courage and activity. But in spite of all that the Lady could urge, never for a moment would his kind heart suspect his cousin of any participation in the designs of the brigands. With the generous obstinacy peculiar to those of noble mind, who can never be brought to think evil of those they love, he still persisted in turning the most suspicious circumstances to his advantage. At first the fact of Robert's absence from the castle that day, after having resisted his own urgent solicitations to follow the hunt, together with the striking resemblance, both in figure and accoutrements, which one of the ruffians

bore to his cousin, a little staggered his faith ; but when he reflected on his own fondness for the chase, he no longer wondered at this change of purpose : then he remembered, too, that the fugitive was unadorned by the blood-red scarf, without which Robert never appeared ; and besides, this robber Knight had been seen before by one of the trappers belonging to the castle, who remained abroad late at night spreading snares for foxes. It was by such arguments that he repelled every effort made by the anxious mother to induce him to investigate the affair more thoroughly ; the real fact was, that feeling himself perfectly assured of the Red Knight's faith, he dreaded, for the sake of what he considered womanish fears, to manifest a distrust, which might lead to a breach between them. It was thus that, interrupting a minute account of Robert's appearance when he rode from the castle, with which

the Lady Blanche endeavoured to shake his fancied security, he replied hastily, "It is vain, Madam, to try to create in me doubts of my cousin's faith. No, let us take a just revenge on the robbers for the affront that has been put upon us, and then see what reward we can bestow upon the Moor for the service he has rendered; but let us not think—"

"Ha! I had forgotten the Moor," eagerly interrupted the Lady Blanche: "Clodomir, dearest love, I can prove that Robert is faithless. The Moor,—the Moor has proof of his guilt, and thou knowest well he speaketh no falsehood. Let him but meet our cousin to-morrow face to face, in thy presence, and if he fail to make good his charge, then I myself will be convinced."

The features of the Baron underwent a slight change at this request, and he replied,

somewhat angrily, "Even as you desire, Madam; I care not. Robert can ever confound his foes: but to-morrow he rides with me to the wood, to seek out the villain Hybelin, whom, in my hearing, he has cursed for his treachery, and cannot, therefore, hear the charge; but on the day succeeding, let the Moor stand forth. But mark me!" he continued, while his eye flashed, and the colour mounted to his cheek, "see that your favourite fail not to prove his accusation. Warn him of the danger: Red Robert is no mean enemy; the Moor will find it to be no small vengeance that my valiant cousin will wreak on him who dares to brand him traitor!"

With these words he left the apartment, exclaiming as he closed the door, "Fool that I was to listen to her complaints! I know that he is innocent. But she feareth for her child; and, besides, women are ever deaf to rea-

son! How can I, as a Knight, expect the renowned Red Robert to submit to be accused by a page — by Saracen — an infidel — and a stranger? In sooth, I know not how to ask it. My Lady, too, seems greatly to rely on yonder Moor; but it is natural; he has saved her child. I, too, should be grateful," he added with a sigh: "I know not why my feelings thus rebel; but then the youth is over bold, methinks, to tax my cousin thus rashly."

The next morning all was again bustle and activity within the walls of the castle. The Baron, whose greatest delight consisted in a skirmish with the robbers, was already filled with joy at the idea of his approaching victory, and might be seen galloping from front to rear of the little cavalcade, superintending preparations for the day's expedition. The Lady Blanche saw him depart with feelings far different to those she had experienced the

day before. A vague foreboding of danger from the robbers, with firm conviction of the Red Knight's treachery, combined to harass her spirits, and made her look forward with dread to the prospect of another tedious day to be spent again in fear and suspense. She could scarcely refrain from weeping as she saw the Baron, in conscious security, talking and laughing with his false cousin as they rode together at the head of the vassals. To her, this blind infatuation seemed almost madness; and she now began to tremble for the safety of the faithful page, who had so boldly risked his own life to save that of her child. She now repented having compromised the Moor at all. If he failed to substantiate his charge, she well knew, that although the Baron might restrain his cousin from taking a deep revenge, yet the poor youth would for ever lose his favour and countenance. Once or twice she

thought to counsel the Moor to retract altogether; but, in that case, if he really did possess the means of proving Robert's guilt, would it not be hard to let the traitor go unpunished, and continue plotting against her husband's safety, in league with his most inveterate enemies? In this dilemma she knew not on whom to call for advice, for she feared to incur the Baron's displeasure by betraying too openly her opinion concerning the Red Knight.

Her joy then may easily be conceived, when a little after noon a courier, habited in a livery of her own well-beloved azure, came to the castle, with the joyful intelligence of the speedy approach of her noble father, the Sire de Loménie, towards La Morlaye, to greet his fair daughter and her valiant husband. Nothing could be more propitious than this event for the Lady Blanche: here was, indeed, a powerful auxiliary raised to support her cause; for,

from the first moment, she resolved to make a confident of her father, and rely on his superior wisdom and experience in awakening the Baron to a sense of his danger; and when she advanced to meet the aged Knight, and perceived the goodly train by which he was followed, she almost looked upon his arrival at such a moment as a special intervention of Providence in her behalf.

As the travellers drew forward, her surprise was, however, excited in no small degree at sight of the companion whom her father appeared to have chosen for his journey. He was an aged and venerable-looking personage, with a long white beard reaching down to his girdle, and clothed in a dress somewhat similar to those of friars and other religious persons whom she was in the daily habit of seeing at the castle. The jovial old Knight had ever been a greater lover of hound or hawk than of monk

or friar, and was not a little suspected of a far greater liking for good cheer than good counsel ; never having been known to express admiration for the most devout blessing ever pronounced if the boar's-head were kept waiting ; and having even once been heard, after a long day's chase on a sultry day, to swear by Saint Stephen, that he would give twenty masses for a single cup of mead.

Inwardly thankful for the change, the Lady Blanche would have bent forward to receive the holy father's blessing, but was prevented by Clotilde, who drew her back, and in a tone of horror exclaimed—

“ Approach him not, my Lady !—know you not he is a Jew ?—his very touch is contamination !” Thus saying, she religiously drew back the lady's dress wherever it touched that of the Jew, muttering to herself as she did so, “ Marry, thank Heaven ! I knew the Jew's gaberdine

from the friar's stole, or I, too, might have been deceived !”

The lady smiled at Clotilde's superstitious fears, but evinced no desire of any closer acquaintance, as the stranger, lifting the bonnet from his head, discovered the unshaven crown, and proved the truth of the damsel's surmises. The Sire de Loménie, who loved a joke, laughed loud at the girl's distress, and vowed, as she shrank to his side to avoid coming in contact with his companion, that he felt more than ever thankful to Providence who had made him no Jew.

The Lady Blanche, who was evidently embarrassed by this novel kind of guest, then remarking that the travellers must need some refreshment, led the way to the banqueting-hall,—a movement which was highly applauded by the jolly old Knight, who thereupon pressed his sentiments in no very refined

ner, by exclaiming that the sight of meat would now be welcome as a bone to a half-starved beagle!

As it was unholy to eat with one who was under the ban of excommunication, a cover was placed for the Jew at the furthest corner of the apartment; but he appeared not to notice the indignity: his eye wandered anxiously to the features of the different domestics as they brought in the viands, and sometimes turned with an expression of meek reproach on the Sire de Loménie, who was, however, too agreeably occupied in discussing the merits of a chine of wild boar, to take much heed of any thing else, otherwise than to express pity for the hard fate of the Jew, who was by his religion debarred from partaking in the same enjoyment. At length, as his appetite began to fail, his attention became gradually awakened to less important matters, and suddenly turning

to the Lady Blanche, he reminded her that he had not yet beheld his fair grandson, who was by no means the least attraction that drew him to La Morlaye.

“He is with the Moorish page at play upon the ramparts,” said the Lady; “they are right good friends, I assure thee; the page loves the child, and the child will pine and weep if he do but lack the page for an instant. Clotilde, bid thee to the ramparts, and fetch Sir Clarion hither.”

“And the Moor likewise,” said the old Knight to the damsel, in a whisper, as she left the apartment.

The tone of mystery in which the Knight had spoken, appeared to have engaged the attention of the stranger; for when Clotilde had disappeared, his eye was riveted in eager expectation upon the closed door, and he bent forward to catch the slightest sound from with-

out. There was a pause of a few minutes, during which all was silent, until the old Knight, who seemed to take a kind of malicious pleasure in watching the Jew's uneasiness, called aloud to remind him that he had not yet touched the goblet which stood by his side. At that moment footsteps were heard approaching; the colour mounted to the cheek of the Jew, and his eye brightened; a light laugh was then audible—it was that of a child—and he listened in breathless suspense; but another voice was heard in answer, and then he started, and putting back the cup which was already raised to his lips, while a smile of intense delight brightened up his features, he appeared more calmly to await the event. The door slowly opened, and the Moor entered, leading by the hand his master's son. With a shout of glee the laughing child flew to the head of the chamber, as he recognized his

grandsire; but the Moor advanced not; his eye fell on the stranger, and he remained riveted to the spot, gazing on his features with a look in which pleasure and surprise were strongly blended. For a few moments he thus stood silent and motionless.

“ Ben-Israel !” at length he murmured in a low soft tone of wonder, as if he really doubted the reality of what he saw.

The Jew did not answer, but fondly stretched his arms towards the youth; and with a wild cry of delight the Moor darted across the hall and sank on his knees at the stranger’s feet. The Jew bent low in fond affection and kissed him on the forehead, and the silver locks of the aged traveller and the black and glossy ringlets of the youthful page were mingled together.

“ Dearest El Adhel !” said the old man in the Arabian language, as he brushed away a

tear that was stealing down his cheek, "do I again behold thee!—wilt thou, indeed, return to give joy to thy father's heart, and restore the bloom to thy mother's fading lip?"

"El Adhel feared he had no longer place in the hearts of his kindred," returned the Moor; "he has mourned his captivity over long."

"Oh, say not so, El Adhel!" said the Jew; "day and night have I sought thee all through this land; fortune alone led me to the dwelling of yonder stranger who kindly brought me hither. But, who would think to find a son of the mighty Aben Malek in a lonely castle of this remote forest? And tell me, how hast thou fared with the Christian? I marvel much to see thee in thy Moorish garb. Have they not, indeed, forced thee to embrace their religion?"

The Moor expatiated gratefully on the kind-

ness shown him by the Baron, and added, that no attempt had ever been made to convert him.

“What !” exclaimed the Jew, “have they not endeavoured by threats and torture to compel thee to exchange the religion of thy race for their own opinions ?”

“They tried it not,” returned the Moor ; “but had they done so, it would have been in vain ; El Adhel would sooner die, than depart from the worship of his forefathers.”

“Then, my son, are they no true Christians, for such is ever the custom of the most devout. But thou wilt not long abide amongst them ; thy father has sent a bag of gold and jewels to purchase thy freedom, more than enough to ransom a Christian king ;—for what are wealth and treasure without El Adhel ? And see ! beautiful blossom of thy father’s house ! thy sorrowing mother has sent thee this token ;

to thee it will express all her grief at thy captivity, and her fervent hope of again beholding thee."

Thus saying, he drew forth a purse of gold net, containing small pearls, sapphires, and other precious stones, with sundry scraps of divers-coloured linen, and bits of gold thread, the meaning of which seemed perfectly intelligible to the Moor, who carefully hid the token in his bosom, and prepared to rise.

"Stay!" exclaimed the Jew, interrupting him; "I had almost forgotten, there is yet another gift; it is from the black-eyed daughter of El Halim. Nay, be not impatient, thou shalt have it quickly."

After searching for some time in his wallet, he drew forth a folded piece of gold brocade, which the Moor opened eagerly, and with a trembling hand. It contained what might appear of little consequence, a dried and

withered rosebud ; but it was evidently of value to the Moor, who kissed it fervently, and placed it next his heart.

The Lady Blanche had remained during the whole of this scene in perfect amazement. Thinking it some ill-timed frolic of her father's in thus bringing one of the proscribed race into the Castle, she had been diligently endeavouring to devise some means that, without seeming to forget the rites of hospitality, would yet enable her to rid herself of this troublesome guest ere her Lord's return. But when she found he was known to the Moor, and that he had moreover brought the youth's ransom, although rejoicing with him at his apparent happiness, yet she sighed, as the recollection came over her that the faithful page was now, by every law, at liberty to depart, and would not be willing to run the risk of violence for her sake, in endeavours to convince the

Baron of the foul treachery of his cousin. She felt, too, a kind of dread at being left again without a protector, for it was evident that La Morlaye would never open his eyes to the danger in which he stood, ere it was too late ; and it was while labouring under these feelings that she disclosed the whole truth to her father, whom she succeeded in convincing that Robert was in league with the robbers, to seek the life of the Baron and his innocent child.

The Sire de Loménie was one of those old persons who delight to make a mystery of the most simple occurrence, and who are equally fond of surprising people into happiness, or confounding them by a sudden discovery of guilt. Here, then, was ample scope for his ingenuity ; but the affair was one of some danger and difficulty, owing to the infatuation of the Baron ; and although the old Knight prided himself not a little upon his singular talent in the discovery

of hidden treason; yet, after musing for some time, in spite of this boasted tact and cleverness, he was fain to confess that nothing could be done in this dilemma but to trust to the generosity of the Moor. He had just arrived at this sage conclusion, when the Moor himself, who had been all the time in earnest conversation with the Jew, advanced towards the Lady Blanche, and while evidently labouring under some strong excitement, without the least preface, abruptly begged permission to remain her slave till he had performed his promise, by producing the proof which was utterly to confound the hypocritical Robert. Overpowered by such unexampled generosity, the Lady Blanche would have protested against this; but he interrupted her by adding, that it was the only reward he claimed for his past services, and the last benefit he could render his little favourite.

The Sire de Loménie, who thus found at once all the anticipated difficulty of persuading the Moor to remain taken off his hands, was in raptures at this noble resolution, and by his loud and voluble thanks and commendations completely drowned the feeble, half-uttered objections of his daughter.

The next thing to be considered was the concealment of the Jew from the Baron ; and here it was that the old Knight's talent for the mysterious shone conspicuous. By his help it was finally arranged, as none of the domestics would be found willing to attend him, their souls being far too precious to be lost for the sin of obedience, in touching any thing which a Jew had handled, that he should be lodged in a small untenanted chamber of the gallery, where the Moor could visit him at night when all had retired to rest ; and as it was not deemed prudent to run the risk of alarming

the sleeping household by returning through the gallery, it was agreed that he should be provided with the key of the private stairs, and thus escape, without observation, across the court-yard to his own chamber. The latter, indeed, might have afforded a more cheerful place of concealment, but as it was now shared, as was the custom, by the Baron's esquire, it was thus rendered unavailable.

This arrangement being resolved upon, Clotilde alone was permitted to share in the secret; and she undertook to persuade the other domestics that the Jew had taken his departure from the Castle.

The old man himself acquiesced in whatever was required of him—enough for him that it was El Adhel's wish; although, as it appeared, the Moor had acquainted him with all the circumstances, for when the youth turned to lead him to the chamber, he exclaimed in a tone of the

deepest feeling, "Generous, noble Saracen! where breathes the Christian who would thus have acted towards thee?"

When the Jew was safely lodged in the little chamber, and the Moor, to avoid observation, had meekly returned to his usual avocations about the Castle, left alone with her father, the Lady Blanche launched forth in praises of El Adhel; his intrepidity and daring, and, above all, the generosity he had displayed, so unlooked for in a Saracen, were themes of her boundless admiration. The old Knight, who appeared to be labouring under a load of mystery, hereupon proceeded to deliver himself of the burden.

"And who is it, think ye, that you have held in bondage thus long?" said he.

"I know not," returned the Lady, "but he must e'en be of gentle blood. This last act alone amply proves him to be no churl."

“ In good sooth, thou sayest well, daughter ; the lad is verily no churl. What thinkest thou ? He is a prince, daughter—a Moorish prince !—son of the renowned and valiant Aben Malek, whose wondrous deeds and feats of arms have spread his fame far and near among Moslem and Christian. Yonder Jew has brought a ransom that would make one born a beggar to hold up his head among the proudest of our nobles ; and, by our Lady ! thy husband will henceforth be of no small consideration in the empire.”

The Lady Blanche stared in amazement. She had often heard the Baron expatiate upon the marvellous prowess of this Moor, whose riches and extraordinary magnificence had excited so great a degree of surprise among the poor and simple knights of Christendom.

“ Thank Heaven !” she, replied, “ I have now the means of requiting him. The gener-



ous youth shall depart hence without ransom, if I possess any power over Clodomir."

It was late that evening when the Baron returned from his expedition, weary with a long day's fruitless search, and dispirited at his ill success; and even while expressing joy at the arrival of the Sire de Loménie, he appeared gloomy and dejected. His cousin seemed also to share in his disappointment, and acted with so much apparent sincerity, that he would doubtless have succeeded in deceiving less watchful eyes than those of the Lady Blanche; but to her his expressions of indignation at the escape of the robber Knight, as he was called, seemed highly exaggerated; and once, too, when Clodomir, as they parted for the night, in his usual kind manner bade him not grieve, for they would meet with better fortune, a bitter expression of scorn and exultation lurked in the corners of his mouth; and

when the Baron, with more warmth, added, that such traitors had but small mercy to expect from one who held such trusty sword and dagger, and knew so well how to use them, the Lady Blanche was in reality terrified at the fiend-like expression of Robert's countenance, as he answered fiercely, "Content ye for that, La Morlaye !" at the same time fixing a glance full of hatred and malice upon the Moor, who stood at the door of the apartment, holding a blazing torch in readiness to conduct her to her chamber. The light shone full upon his face, and showed that his own gaze was riveted on the Red Knight ; and when the latter spoke, the snowy teeth of the Moor glittered through his parted lips, while a calm smile of derision passed over his features, which then relapsed into their former composed expression.

Owing to the unlooked-for arrival of the Sire de Loménie, with his numerous train, all

was bustle and confusion within the Castle until a late hour of the night ; and it was long past the usual time of retiring to rest, when the Moor, accompanied by Raoul the esquire, sought his own chamber. Here again his patience was put to the test ; for the sturdy squire, who in general was fast locked in sleep before the more watchful page had closed his eyes, seemed now unusually loquacious and wakeful ; and it was not until the events of the day had all been recapitulated and commented upon, that his welcome “ good night ! ” fell like music on the ear of his companion, who lay stretched on his pallet in restless anxiety, waiting to descend unobserved. In a short time, the heavy breathings of Raoul announced that he was buried in a deep slumber ; and the vigilant Moor, taking the basket of provisions which he had concealed, and a small lamp, to enable him to distinguish his way to the gallery, stole softly down the staircase into the court-yard.

It was now past midnight ; all was silent as the grave, and nothing was seen, save a single taper shining from the casement of the Red Knight. Even that was withdrawn while yet the Moor stood to gaze ; all was then darkness, and showed that the gloomy inmate of that chamber had at length sought repose.

The moon had risen clear and bright, and rendered each object distinctly visible as in broad noon-day ; the Moor therefore hid the lamp under his cloak, and creeping close under the shadow of the projecting angles of the building, soon reached the long narrow passage which, ending in the private stair, led to the gallery. Here he was obliged to uncover the lamp ere he could venture to proceed, the deep gloom rendering it unsafe for him to advance without light, owing to the broken fragments of stone and heaps of rubbish with which, from long disuse, the passage was encumbered. As he paused to remove the cloak, he

fancied he heard a sound, like that of approaching footsteps; he stopped for a moment, and listened in breathless alarm, in dread lest it might be the warder, who would instantly alarm the whole Castle: the sound was not repeated; and checking his rising fears, he endeavoured to persuade himself that it was the echo of his own footsteps alone which had disturbed the silence.

Again he proceeded, till he reached the door; here, as he once more paused to turn the key, he now distinctly heard the tread of an iron-heeled boot pacing the court-yard without; the steps were slow and cautious as his own, but firm and heavy, like those of a soldier. The terror of the Moor increased as they advanced to the entrance of the passage, and there stopped. Uncertain whether to proceed or return, he remained for a few moments irresolute, with his hand upon the lock, listening in an agony of suspense. The

silence remained undisturbed, and he began again to fancy that his imagination had deceived him, when suddenly a loud shrill whistle echoed through the vaulted-passage. It was immediately answered by another, proceeding from some one concealed behind the buttress at the entrance, who quickly stepped forward, and then two voices were heard in earnest conversation.

“Holy Allah! it is the warder!” said the Moor in a whisper, and in an agony of affright he closed the door, and locking it after him, rushed up the stair, extinguished the lamp, trusting to his memory to reach the chamber of the Jew, and resolving to return through the gallery rather than by the court-yard.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.



